







YOUTH WINS

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"Non fate guerra al Maggio."

Lorenzo di Medici



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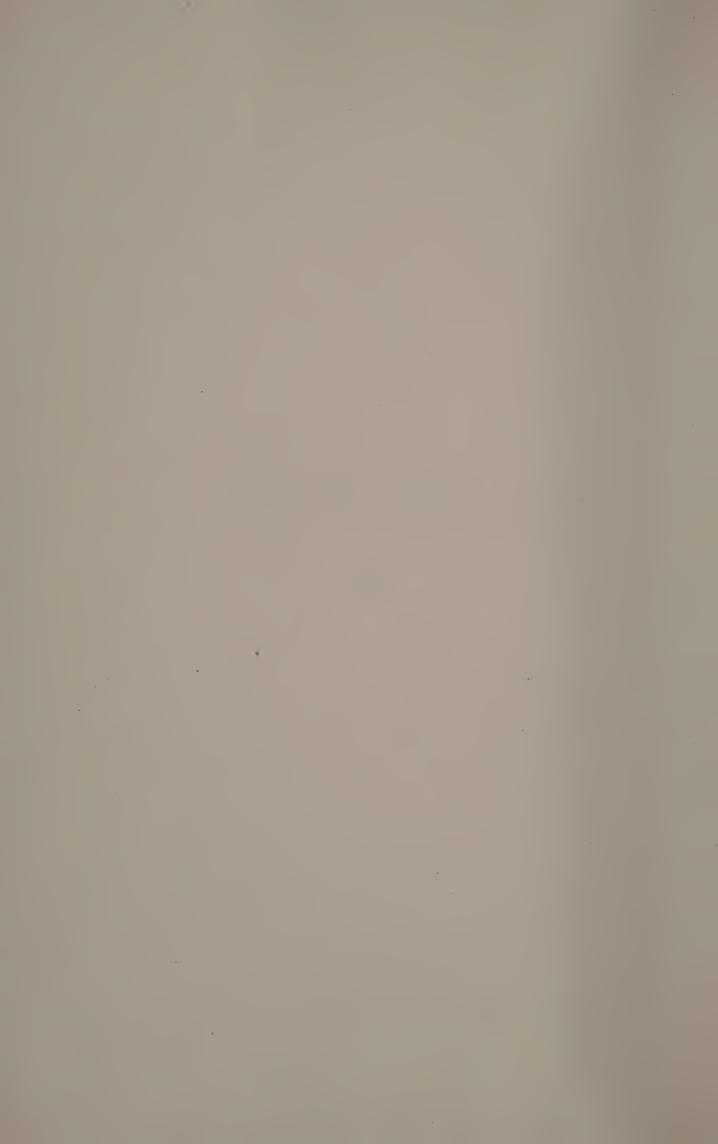
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To E. KATHLEEN GODDARD







YOUTH WINS

CHAPTER I

Although for the last hour the train had mounted wooded slopes, Mrs. Bickersteth's eyes still ached from the glare of the sun on chalky hills. When they drew up at Bagnoles de l'Orne, she lowered herself on to the platform with the nervous deliberation of a solidly built woman recovering from an attack of phlebitis.

She felt dusty and dishevelled as she stood there, her weight on her sound leg, wondering where Piper was and bewildered by the shrill voices of a group, obviously French, gathered round the adjacent door. Such unnecessary vehemence! Mrs. Bickersteth frowned at them.

But how smart the women looked! How exactly "right"—that was the word. The elderly lady, keeneyed, became aware of defects, hitherto unrealized, in her own sober costume. Her hat was at the wrong angle; her skirt too short, whilst the coat was too long, though made on purpose for this visit by the tailor patronized by the county. (And a nice price he had charged too!) That dark woman was well over forty, not really slim when you looked closely, yet— Mrs. Bickersteth felt

puzzled. How did they keep the smooth wave in their hair when her own, still thick though grey, would "go flat" and the "ends" straggle? The desolation of the fifties descended on her like a cloud.

No porters and where was Piper?

Ah, she was getting old too. A faint feeling of satisfaction, difficult to analyze, revived Mrs. Bickersteth's drooping spirits. Recovering her dignity, she moved stiffly past the vociferous group, her finely cut nostrils protesting against the heavy wave of perfume that emanated from the women.

"And painted up to the eyes," she decided. "That's why they keep so fresh!"

Through the thinning crowd she could see at last the hurrying figure of her maid, tight-lipped, neat and shrivelled. Up she came, panting, vexed.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but I couldn't get out—all chattering in the corridor!" Under her breath she fumed, "And keeping you standing with that bag." She retrieved the well-worn article and proffered a bony arm. "Now, ma'am, if you'll lean on me, I'll see you safely to the bus and then come back for the luggage."

"One minute, Piper," her mistress checked her. "Just look at that hat. No, there, on the woman in the beige dress. Don't you think we could do something like it to the one I bought at Madame Olive's? Give it a tilt up at the back?"

Piper obediently gazed—and sniffed.

"I don't see any call for it, ma'am. She told you it was the latest fashion. A pity to spoil it, it suits you fine. What?" She glared at a porter who was volubly

demanding luggage. "Not yet," she told him severely, and repeated it in a louder voice.

Mrs. Bickersteth's tired eyes twinkled.

"Bientôt," she said graciously, and drew herself up when the man, with an angry shrug, flung back a retort.

"Talk about manners!" snapped Piper. "But there, you don't find 'em abroad. Now, ma'am." She drew her forward. "I'll be glad to get you into bed. You're looking fairly done. Pardon?" They circled round a fat Frenchman and bumped into an excited child dressed in an aggressive tartan. "Your own fault—you should look!" Piper's patience had given out.

In the depth of her faithful heart she had long since decided that this "cure" was a desperate venture. Far better to have stayed at home—where you knew what was in the food.

At length the weary business was over. Seated on the hot velvet of the stuffy omnibus, they rumbled across to the hotel, the journey a mere matter of minutes.

"Might 'a' walked and saved the fare," Piper grumbled to herself. "I only hope there'll be a lift that's not the sort where they shuts you in, helpless, with a row of buttons." She straightened her bony shoulders. "Here we are, ma'am," she said aloud. "Now, be careful of the step!"

"Thank you, Piper, I can manage." Mrs. Bickersteth, on her mettle, descended and entered the big hotel.

The hall was gloomy and uninviting; the spruce clerk indifferent. He pointed to the register and proffered a needle-pointed pen. Mrs. Bickersteth removed her gloves and wrote, rather shakily, her name on the space indi-

cated, added "and maid," with, beyond this, her address: "Torlish Manor, Devon, England."

A chasseur, airily swinging the keys, took them up in the lift, to Piper's relief, and they halted at the first floor, insisted upon by Adela; Adela, her dear daughter, Mrs. Bickersteth thought confusedly, married so well—a darling baby! She stepped out on to the corridor and evading Piper's intention—no arm here, it was carpeted—moved alone after the page, the maid sedately in her wake.

A chambermaid bustled up, stout, benignant, and opened the door, with a cheerful: "Bon jour, madame." For the first floor brought good tips.

Mrs. Bickersteth entered the room.

"Oh!" She blinked with surprise and pleasure.

For the sunshine was pouring in over a low balcony that ran the length of the pair of windows; a solidly built affair with a parapet of terra-cotta, like a theatre-box facing the stage, set for some pastoral comedy. It looked too fertile to be real after the long, arid journey.

Wooded heights, deliciously green, were piled against the summer sky in a semi-circle enclosing a lake that shone in the near foreground; the white finger of a road pointed between gaps in the trees, or the sharp ear of a red roof rose from a hidden villa, on tiptoe, listening for a breath of romance.

Expectation—the key-note of youth. Mrs. Bickersteth nodded wisely. The message had reached her susceptible heart. With an effort she drew her eyes away and surveyed her new quarters. A good room, she decided, bare yet ornate, lacking "our English sense of comfort."

"But nice and airy," she said to Piper, "though the

bed's rather high from the floor." She moved nearer to the window. "It is pretty. Look at the lake!"

But Piper was occupied, "measuring up" the chamber-maid.

"Hot water, to drink—you understand?" She made a vague gesture towards her mouth. "À buver—for tea. Are they bringing that luggage up?"

A loud bump outside the door answered the final question. Piper flew to retrieve the inverted picnic-hamper. Mrs. Bickersteth could hear behind her voices raised in expostulation, the shuffling of list slippers, more bumps and a man's throat cleared with Gallic thoroughness.

"Yes, I'm in France," she mused.

The door banged and Piper spoke.

"I'll soon get you a cup o' tea, ma'am. You'd better come and lay down."

"In a minute. I must step out first." She suited the action to the words.

"Then you'll have a chair," Piper scolded.

She seized the nearest one, in imitation Louis Quinze, wedged it through the opening and held it until her mistress subsided.

"Piper, do look at the lake?"

"Yes'm."

Mrs. Bickersteth turned her head. Piper had gone back to the luggage! The elderly lady sighed.

"Treats me like a child," she thought, leaning her arms on the parapet. "To be ordered about, at my age! I really get annoyed sometimes." A sudden sense of ingratitude smote her, a memory of long years of service. "Still, so devoted. I don't know what I should do with-

out her. It comes of course from having been the children's nurse in the early days. She's got into the way of ruling. Well, I don't see that it matters much," she concluded comfortably, "so long as she doesn't correct me in public. And it's heavenly to be out of the train."

A little breeze, ruffling the lake beyond the road, stirred the bushes in the garden and wafted the scent of syringa to her. The grass on the long slope was faded, though the month was only April, and the sand court for tennis glittered, shrouded in its wire nets like an enormous bird-cage. From this lower level, a flight of steps with terracotta balustrades rose to a wide terrace that stretched the length of the hotel. Peering down, she could see wicker chairs and little round tables, with marble tops, arranged in groups facing the view. It looked gay and inviting, suggesting a life passed in the open for purposes of leisure, of refreshment and conversation, as distinct from exercise.

"Foreign," dreamed Mrs. Bickersteth. "And how they love to talk!"

She smiled at the thought. There would be plenty to study here from the vantage point of her theatre-box. She had a passion for watching people, inventing their life-histories, especially those of the young. Although her reasoning powers were faulty, she was often correct in a swift diagnosis of incipient love affairs. These were her speciality. The maternal instinct, strong in her, invited confidences too, piercing the reticent armour of youth. She was known privately, for miles round Torlish Manor, as "dear old Mrs. B.," was aware of it and inwardly proud, accepting the second adjective on the lips

of the younger generation as a proof of comradeship. Not really "old," but in her prime. Fifty-four was only an early milestone on the long downhill road. "Though I shan't pretend when I get there," she thought. "But I'm not going to bury myself just yet."

A sound from below caught her attention. At this hour the terrace was bathed in silence, save for a steady murmuring voice directly beneath the balcony. Mrs. Bickersteth leaned forward, craning her neck, her knees pressed to the balustrade.

There, in the shade thrown by the walls, stretched on a chaise-longue, was an old lady, placidly knitting, whilst, seated close beside her, a girl read aloud from a book in her hands. At a little distance, perched sideways on the parapet, a young man surveyed the garden, idly swinging a tennis-racket. These were the only hotel visitors in sight, save a pair of children playing ball on the lower path.

Mrs. Bickersteth—a true woman—gave the young man her attention first. She liked the way he held himself in this careless position, shoulder-blades flat. She could see his tanned face in profile, vigorous and clean-cut, and she judged his age to be under thirty.

"He ought to have a hat on," she thought, "sitting in the blaze of the sun."

Her motherly heart warmed to him, noting the way his hair grew crisply, nut-brown on his well-shaped head, and the sinewy strength of his long hands. All young men were dear to her for the sake of a grave in Flanders. A slight film obscured her sight; Dicky had had the same bright hair.

Presently her interest deepened, as she caught him in a sidelong glance. She guessed why he was dawdling there. The attraction was the girl below and the sound of her soft, cool young voice.

A wide-brimmed hat screened her face and Mrs. Bickersteth peered in vain, as a fragment from the open book drifted up to her ears:

"'Then he went in and closed the door and there was silence in the garden."

"English," she thought delightedly. "The man too. He looks so *clean*."

From behind came Piper's voice:

"Now, ma'am, the bed's all ready and the kettle will soon be on the boil."

Mrs. Bickersteth patiently rose to her feet. The edge of the parapet was dusty. She picked up her gloves lying there and gave them a vigorous shake.

Something shot out of the chamois folds, caught the sun's rays as it fell, and struck the tiled pavement below with a sharp, tinkling note.

"My emerald ring!" The cry escaped her.

The pair on the terrace looked up. Mrs. Bickersteth, even at such a moment, felt a thrill of curiosity. She caught a glimpse of a pale face, dead-gold hair and sapphire eyes, under the disguising hat. Then her attention swerved.

For the young man had slipped from his perch and was coming forward eagerly.

"It's rolled under your chair," he told the girl. "Don't you move—I'll get it."

Stooping, he thrust out a long arm, groped and retrieved the object.

"Here it is," he informed the owner cheerfully, his eyes raised to the balcony. "Would you like me to bring it up to you?"

Mrs. Bickersteth beamed at him.

"Oh, don't trouble! My maid will fetch it. So many thanks." She looked down at the old lady. "I hope it didn't startle you? It was lodged in my glove and when I shook it—"

"Not at all," said the other suavely.

She seemed to ignore the young man. He stood there, hesitating. Then he handed the ring to the girl.

"Perhaps you'd better take care of it."

She received it from him without a word, without so much as an answering glance, holding it in her slender fingers, apparently absorbed in the object.

"Thank you," said the old lady coldly.

It was a dismissal. The young man nodded, wheeled round and made his way to the door that led into the hotel.

Mrs. Bickersteth felt sorry for him.

"Snubbed," she thought. "And he didn't deserve it!.

Apparently they're not acquainted."

This upset her theories.

Piper, summoned by her cry, had already started on her mission. Mrs. Bickersteth saw her emerge and walk, in her own distinctive fashion, which suggested energy, discretion, and a careful balance between respect and a knowledge of her own worth, in the direction of the pair.

"Now," thought Mrs. Bickersteth, and watched the en-

counter eagerly. "If they're all right," she thought, "they'll be nice. If not, they'll snub Piper too."

Nothing could have been more gracious than the reception afforded her maid. She heard the old lady say: "I hope it hasn't loosened the stone?" and Piper's prim rejoinder.

She was lost now in the shade of the walls, but the sound of her flat feet on the tiles rose to Mrs. Bickersteth's ears.

The girl had opened the book again.

"Shall I go on?" she asked the old lady.

"Do, my dear, unless you're tired." She gathered up her discarded knitting.

Mrs. Bickersteth, above, with the sense of a scolding awaiting her, made use of the short reprieve to study the older woman. There was something both charming and intriguing about the slight figure, stretched at ease, and the picture she achieved of age, dignified yet faintly coquettish. Her white hair was swept back from a forehead singularly free from lines and arranged in soft rolls on either temple. Over this was thrown a mantilla of Spanish lace, raised on a comb, the long ends knotted together and fastened by a pearl brooch. The delicate pink of her skin was enhanced by the sombre lace and by the shawl drawn round her shoulders, also black, with a silk fringe, and embroidered in heavily raised flowers, roses paled by time and use. A light rug was spread over her knees, but one foot had escaped the folds, shod in suède with a steel buckle.

It was a foot which a girl might have envied, slender and arched, the ankle above, in its gossamer silk stocking, equally neat and arresting. Round her slight wrists were bands of black velvet secured by antique pearl clasps. Pearls gleamed in her little ears, and the mantilla was held in place by a tiny arrow set with brilliants.

"She looks like a French Marquise in the days of the guillotine," Mrs. Bickersteth romanced. "I suppose they must be mother and daughter, though the girl is a different type—Saxon. But why did they snub that goodlooking boy? Coming, Piper!" Regretfully, she backed through the open window.

Refreshed by an hour's sleep, Mrs. Bickersteth went down to dinner on the stroke of the gong.

Passing a mirror in the hall, she glanced sideways at her reflection. She was thoroughly satisfied. Last year's garden-party dress, with the new trimming from Debenham's that had cost seventeen and sixpence a yard, the jet comb upright in her hair and the London corsets which Adela had insisted upon—six suspenders that made the stockings so tight at the top, but certainly improved the figure—and Grannie's old Chantilly shawl, beautifully darned by Piper. She could "hold her own" among the French! In England, patriotism was silent, not exactly good form, but once safely across the Channel she must not give way to "foreigners." Especially at this juncture when the French were behaving disgracefully—every one in Torlish said so—over the question of the Ruhr.

This was the sum of her thoughts as she entered the long dining-room and was steered to a distant table in the folds of the leather screen that disguised the way to the kitchen.

She settled her skirts and looked around her.

On her left, almost at her elbow, the recess held another table, laid for one. A wide gulf divided the pair from a family party in the window, easy to diagnose; Gallic, adorned with napkins as bibs, vociferous, the elders absorbed in the two little girls in their smart frocks and the son and heir, aged about twelve, with a white, precocious face and long legs bare to the thighs, ending in short striped socks and untanned yellow boots.

The legs shocked Mrs. Bickersteth as the boy twined them under his chair. There was nothing childish about them; they were nude and swarthy—unpardonable!

The boy's sly eyes swerved to her face, aware of her disapproving glance. He leaned sideways sinuously and whispered in his father's ear. There followed a shrill explosion of mirth that rippled round the crowded table.

Mrs. Bickersteth stared past them, her Roman nose elevated, her eyes fixed on the door.

It opened, and in came the young man of the terrace episode.

He looked well in his dinner-jacket. The white expanse of shirt-front enhanced the healthy bronze of his skin—the result of hotter skies than these—and the clearness of his grey eyes. There was nothing to beat an Anglo-Saxon, that cold-tubbed look, the spectator decided.

He made his way easily in a bee-line for the screen.

"I believe he's coming here," she thought, and a touch of excitement warmed her cheeks, still smooth and fresh, above the folds of her double chin.

As he passed her table, she glanced at him, smiled

slightly and bowed. She divined a secret surprise and pleasure in his answering salutation.

"Poor boy, I believe he's lonely!" she thought.

He settled himself in the chair on her left, picked up the menu, ran through it, and looked shyly at his neighbour.

Mrs. Bickersteth opened the attack.

"I must thank you for finding my ring," she said. "It's quite all right." She touched the finger on which her treasure hung loosely, the result of weeks in bed which had thinned her "in the wrong places." So she had written to Adela. "I was so afraid that the fall might have chipped the emerald. They're such brittle stones and, as it happens, I'm very fond of this one. It was my mother's engagement ring. But it isn't even scratched," she concluded.

"That's lucky," the young man responded. "I don't know much about stones, but it seemed a mighty fine ring."

Mrs. Bickersteth's brown eyes narrowed. Not only the transatlantic expression, but something about his intonation brought a doubt into her mind. Characteristically, she proceeded to clear the ground at once.

"I was wondering who would come to your table," she said in her pleasant, slow voice, and paused for the waiter to lay down her soup-plate. "And I hoped it would be some one English. I'm not very good at speaking French, although, of course, I know the language, and when one's alone—" She left it unfinished.

"Sure." The word was sympathetic. More so were the grey eyes turned on her for a minute.

"Then you are English?" she insisted.

"Rather!" He smiled. "Did you think I was American? I suppose it's from having lived there for the last five years. This is my first trip home since I went to California. I've been already chaffed about it," he added confidentially. "It's catching, you know, the way they speak. And"—he hesitated—"quicker. That's what struck me on my return. We don't have the same vivid expressions. But everything's slower. Not that I don't love old England—and especially since the War and the way she has stood being taxed to the limit and is paying off her debts—but sometimes I wish she'd get a move on! Not only in business but—other ways."

Mrs. Bickersteth felt that the young man had checked himself. She looked at him inquiringly, an invitation in her glance.

"Yes?" So soft and comfortable was her voice that her neighbour yielded to it.

"Well, for instance, you're the first stranger who has spoken to me anywhere since I left the boat at Liverpool. I've been here a full week," he complained, "and I was getting desperate! Of course, from the French, one doesn't expect it, but one's own countrymen— You see, in the War it was different. I didn't exactly realize that we'd gone back to the old ways." His voice sounded apologetic, but there was faint pain in his eyes.

Mrs. Bickersteth remembered the snub administered on the terrace. She gave him her most motherly smile, pleased by his spontaneity.

"It must have been dreadfully dull for you. Are there many English here?"

"No." His attention was diverted.

Mrs. Bickersteth followed his glance. Through the doorway afar she could see the pair approaching who were uppermost in her mind: the little old lady, picturesque in a gown of grey taffeta that shone like silver as she moved, the tall, pale girl by her side, her golden head held languidly on the frail column of her neck, her sapphire eyes half-closed under the full, drooping lids.

For a second, as she gazed at them, Mrs. Bickersteth was caught by a disturbing illusion. It seemed to her that their rôles were inverted: that age had changed places with youth.

That silvery figure, so light on her feet, so dainty and vivacious, advanced with a subtle air of conquest, one hand on her daughter's arm, bowing and smiling to friends as she passed, whilst the girl in her narrow, russet frock, seemed her shadow, sad as an autumn leaf swayed by the wind and aware that the glamour of summer had departed.

The head-waiter hurried forward to usher the pair to a central table with every mark of respect. He took from the girl a soft, grey cloak, with a collar of chinchilla and draped it on the back of the older woman's chair, beckoned to an understudy, bowed, smiled and departed.

The commonplace incident restored the watcher's normal balance. Once more she placed them as mother and daughter.

The old lady glanced behind her and gave a pettish shrug of her shoulders under their fichu of Mechlin lace. Immediately the young one rose and arranged the cloak round the fragile form, carefully, leaving her arms free.

Mrs. Bickersteth watched this approvingly, yet with a sense of something missing, a link with the past which she could not catch. She turned again to her table neighbour.

"It's odd," she said. "I have a feeling that I've met those two before—the table you are looking at. Do you happen to know their name?"

She saw him give a little start, as if he had forgotten her presence.

"The old lady with the daughter? It's Verney—the Honourable Mrs. Verney."

"No?" Mrs. Bickersteth was excited. "But of course I've met them! Down in Norfolk. Years ago, before the War. They came to a house where we were staying—to a tennis-party—and every one was talking about Miss Verney's engagement to Roland Scrope. So young, only seventeen, and such a brilliant match." She paused, aware of the young man's expression, startled and incredulous.

"Before the War? But she isn't married."

"No—let me think? He was killed. In the same year as—as our son. The girl must be"—she made a swift calculation—"nearly twenty-seven now."

"Killed?" He was frowning. "Is that why she looks like that?"

"Like what?" Again Mrs. Bickersteth felt both curious and uneasy. There was something wrong, then?

"Oh, I don't know." His voice was muffled. "As if life weren't good enough."

Mrs. Bickersteth nodded dumbly; she was always afraid of bones in fish.

"Of course," said the young man hastily, "I'm only talking by guess work. I don't—er—know them to speak to, but being English, I'm interested. More than in the foreign crowd. Especially as we travelled together. That is, as far as Paris."

"No? And then you found them here?" Mrs. Bickersteth nobly signed to the waiter, who bore off the remains of her whiting. Her instinct for romance had triumphed over her appetite. "You stayed in Paris?"

"The week-end." He looked nervous. "Then I got fed-up with it. Somehow in the War it seemed more cheery altogether. Contrast, I reckon, or perhaps having pals blow in."

Into Mrs. Bickersteth's brain flashed an illuminating thought. He had learned the Verneys' destination and followed them blindly to Bagnoles! Love at first sight? They had met on the boat and he had got into their carriage at Calais. Luggage-labels? Her heart glowed. Unless— She must settle this doubt at once.

"Are you taking the cure here?" she inquired.

"In a sort of way." He avoided her glance.

"Not for phlebitis, surely?"

"What's that?"

She explained: a clot in a vein from some accident, or a gouty tendency.

"My own trouble," she added bravely. "My father was a martyr to gout."

"Hard luck," said the young man. "But it's gone now, I hope?" He looked quite anxious until she had reassured him. "Mine's only rheumatism, which I picked up in the trenches. Seemed to me a sound move to stun it at

one of these French places during my holiday abroad. Not that it troubles me often now, thanks to a dry climate."

"You're quite right to take it in time." Mrs. Bickersteth hid her amusement. She guessed that it was an excuse. Why should a healthy young man spend his holiday at a thermal station among a crowd of invalids? And this wasn't even like Aix or Vichy. She added, with a flicker of mischief, "Though I didn't understand that Bagnoles was good for rheumatic complaints?"

"Oh, it's good for anything," he laughed, "according to the resident doctors."

"I suppose so." Mrs. Bickersteth's chin vibrated in sympathy with her thoughts. "This isn't goat, is it?" She examined the meat on her plate. "I've always been afraid of goat since I once stayed in Switzerland and ate it without knowing."

"Veal, according to the menu."

A pause ensued, for Mrs. Bickersteth was hungry. Between mouthfuls, her gaze sought the central table. What a romance! She saw her way to helping that nice boy by her side. Yes, a proper introduction. Of course Mrs. Verney was careful, with a beautiful girl like that. But—was she beautiful? Mrs. Bickersteth scrutinized her. Her features were delicately chiselled; her hair and eyes would move an artist. Yet always there was that missing factor: a sense of youth and vitality.

"Anæmic," Mrs. Bickersteth thought. "If she were my daughter I'd give her iron. She's too lethargic. Her lips are pale. It can't be from the old shock now? At nineteen a girl forgets. Time is merciful to the young.

Though I wonder she didn't marry him. A long engagement, two years? Especially in those days when young people refused to wait. And even before! I remember the time we went through when Henry and Christabel were married. Such a rush getting the trousseau. Still, they're very happy now. Youth sometimes knows best."

She refused the vegetable course. Why couldn't they serve it with the meat? Such diminutive peas—not worth eating. Bottled perhaps? Her thoughts slipped back to her first meeting with the Verneys. In those happy days before the War—yes, in 1913—and the easy country life, hospitable, hedged about with reverence for her own class, with neighbourly feeling and traditions. She could see once more the pretty girl—"Joceline," that was her name!—in the first bloom of her youth, radiant, walking with her lover, laughing, talking, suddenly shy when congratulations were showered on the pair. In those days she had a colour that came and went in her rounded cheeks, her hair as bright as spun silk. But the mother—Mrs. Bickersteth wondered, as a picture slowly rose in her mind.

A background figure, slight and dark, carefully dressed in a country fashion, redeemed from insignificance by her dignified manner and well-bred voice, but with none of her present allurement. She had then been past her prime, for her daughter had come to her late in life, and she suffered from indifferent health, a little overpowered by her husband, a well-known shot and keen sportsman, her junior by ten years. Mrs. Bickersteth suddenly remembered that he had been killed during the War, the victim of a Zeppelin raid on an East Coast town, where he had served in some official capacity.

A widow? Did that account for the change? Mrs. Bickersteth was intrigued.

"It's strange," she thought, "how in England one meets so many widows and so few widowers. It's the *men* who marry again."

How often, too, widowhood seemed to renew the youth in a certain shallow type of woman. What was the secret? A sense of power, of holding the reins of government in indisputed command of the income? At least when the survivor was rich, and the Verneys all possessed money. Despite sorrow, to reign at last, unchallenged; to "own" instead of sharing. To be free—Mrs. Bickersteth, old-fashioned and loving her quiet husband, shrank from the obvious conclusion—free, to attract other men. An Indian summer of Romance.

Immediately she felt ashamed. Here was no "mutton dressed as lamb," but a picturesque old lady, with a devoted child. She could see Joceline lean forward and fill her parent's empty glass from the half-bottle of white wine, and the mother's airy gesture of amusement and reproof.

"They seem very fond of one another."

"Yes," the man on her left agreed, for, unconsciously, she had spoken aloud.

Something in the way he said it caught her attention. She looked at him. His eyes were unsmiling, his lips compressed.

"Jealous," she thought, amused.

"Hot in here, isn't it?" he suggested presently. "I'm going to have my coffee outside."

With this, he rose from the table.

As he passed hers, he paused for a moment.

"Shall I keep a chair for you on the terrace?" he asked her rather shyly. "There's a run on them when people turn out."

"That's very nice of you." Mrs. Bickersteth beamed at him, as he stood, straight and tall, beside her. "But I don't think *this* evening—I'm rather tired from my journey. Another night. Do tell me your name?"

"Oliver Trench," he answered promptly.

"And I'm Mrs. Bickersteth. You'll never remember that," she laughed.

"You bet I shall." He gave her a sunny glance. "Well, good night. Hope you'll sleep."

She watched him thread his way through the still crowded room. She noticed that he chose a route avoiding the central table, his head rather rigid on his shoulders.

"He's proud," she thought. "I like that. Well, to-morrow I shall speak to the Verneys, remind them of our old acquaintance. Then—" She gave a wise little smile.

It was strange, she thought complacently, how fate so often singled her out to act providence to the young.

The young? At that instant, Joceline Verney rose to her feet. She seemed to feel Mrs. Bickersteth's kindly glance, for she stared down the long room, her blue eyes wide open. Her face was still and void of expression, the pale lips firmly closed. To Mrs. Bickersteth, startled, it seemed to hold the resignation of age. She recalled the young man's description: "As if life weren't good enough!"

CHAPTER II

OCELINE VERNEY stood on the steps watching her mother start for a drive with a certain Lady Carnedin, a Bagnoles habituée whom they had met the year before.

She could see the old lady's bright eyes turned towards the latter, her lips moving mischievously, and hear her companion's staccato laugh. Then the bright eyes moved to the girl and Mrs. Verney waved her hand; the tires bit the chalky road, and the car vanished out of sight in a white cloud of dust.

Joceline turned and re-entered the lounge.

Two hours to herself, at last! What would she do with them? She stood, looking on to the sunny terrace, silent in the afternoon hours, when most of the visitors were driving or taking a siesta, and a little shiver ran over her shoulders. Strange how she always was chilly now? She felt a longing for the sunshine, to lie in it, like a lizard, and bask.

Avoiding their accustomed corner, she dragged a chair to the parapet, close to the flight of steps, dropped into it and closed her eyes.

Two hours of warm silence, freed from the endless strain of attention; of "No, mother" and "Yes, mother," with the smile at the right moment when Mrs. Verney's light wit played on the people round them, or resurrected time-worn jokes—that intimate trial of family life.

She loved her mother, but she was tired. Always tired. Why was it? Even now she could not rest; her head ached and her feet were cold.

She opened her eyes and leaned forward, her slender arms on the warm brick; an attitude that seemed to relieve her, although she did not guess the cause, that it helped the heart's action. From below, a child's happy laughter drifted up and she turned her head in the direction of the sound.

Two figures were caught in the glittering bird-cage. She watched them incuriously. Trench, with a racket in his hand, was serving soft and easy balls to one of the French children who were his neighbours at table d'hôte.

The little girl darted about like a bright-hued butterfly and screamed with joy whenever she managed to hoist the ball back over the net. She held the racket, which was her brother's, awkwardly, in both hands. The young man was laughing too, at the small player's antics. Joceline watched them wistfully. They looked so alive and childishly happy, as if the world were their playground and their bodies would never tire. But presently, with one of those swift changes of mood known to childhood, the little girl caught sight of her brother, mounted on his bicycle, scorching round the lower path, his body bent until his chin nearly touched the handle-bar, bare legs working furiously, and she threw down her racket, discontented. Off she went, through the wired door, without another thought of Trench.

"Pierre, Pierre!" she cried shrilly, running across the scorched grass.

The young man, left to himself, picked up the scattered

balls and began to practise serving. Joceline could see his long arm swing up over his head, his body taut as he put his weight into each lightning stroke. She watched him, hypnotized by the easy strength of his movements. She wondered what he was doing here, so far from his native land; for, in common with Mrs. Bickersteth, she had placed him as an American.

In time he tired of the one-sided game, slung the balls over his racket, and emerged, to make his way along the upper path to the steps. As he mounted these, he saw the girl, her elbows on the parapet, chin cupped in her hands.

The light sprang up in his face. Alone? And the terrace void of guests, with no sign of her watchful parent.

He looked deliberately up at her and caught her eyes, so deeply blue, with that baffling, blank suggestion behind them, and his blood quickened. For into them had leaped a remote spark, not of recognition, but of youth answering the call of youth.

Should he risk it—the chance of another snub? For a moment he wrestled with his pride; then something in the droop of her shoulders swept it aside, to be replaced by a wave of tenderness. He had reached her level and he paused, swinging the net of balls by its string and gathering his courage together.

"Would you—do you play tennis?" he stammered. She drew her hands from her face, startled.

"I? No." Something drove her to add, "I used to. Years ago."

"Then you'd soon get into it again." Now he was speaking quickly, as though time were all that mattered,

this breathing-space without her parent. "It's quite a decent court—not so good as grass, of course, but swifter. Do have just one game? It would be—so kind of you."

Joceline shook her head.

"I don't play. And it's too hot."

"You wouldn't feel it once you'd started, and it seems cooler down there."

"I can't." She leaned back in her chair, resisting the urge of his will. "I don't want to. I've a headache."

His face changed.

"That's bad." But he did not move. Instead, he leaned against the pillar supporting a terra-cotta vase in which some weedy geraniums straggled. "I could cure it," he said simply.

She stared at him, taken aback. Through her mind there darted the thought that Americans were "like that," dispensing with formalities.

He seemed to be waiting for her response.

"I suppose you mean with some drug?" she asked, in her clear, cool voice. "Thanks, but I never take them."

"No, a much simpler way." He was smiling now, more assured. She hadn't given him his congé. "I'll tell you." He swung himself up on the parapet easily. Now they were almost face to face. "Where I live—in California—a neighbour of ours has a little girl, a dear kid, but delicate. And she used to get thundering headaches. Well, I found out, quite by accident, that I could take them away. You mustn't think me a crank," he urged, "faithcure and all that, but I do believe that many people can help the sick if they're fit themselves. I know I can, because I've proved it."

Against her will, she was interested.

"By hypnotism?" On the word, she stiffened uneasily.

"Certainly not. That's dangerous, unless you've studied medicine." He paused, for he saw a faint spasm of pain cross her brow and her eyes narrow. "You have got a bad headache!" He leaned towards her impulsively. "Just give me your hands?"

She recoiled, with a swift upward glance. But his face was as grave and pitiful as that of a doctor treating a child.

"Don't be silly," he said gently. "It is silly to suffer pain when there's no need for it. You can trust me—you can, really." His eyes for a moment swept the row of windows above with their closed shutters and the door leading into the empty lounge. Before she could defend herself he had stooped and captured her lax hands and was holding them firmly in his own. "Now, lean back, close your eyes and think of nothing," he commanded.

She was baffled by the unexpected turn of affairs. The man was mad, but what could she do? To struggle would be undignified. The words of protest died on her lips. Those grey eyes studying her were so honest and pitiful, with never a suspicion in them of an unworthy motive. He believed in himself and his theories. Another stab pierced her head and she felt limp and powerless. Let him cure her, if he could! But she watched him under lowered lids.

"That's right! Now relax your muscles. Soon the pain will begin to go." He saw the flutter of her lashes, a darker colour than her hair, silky and fine, as she spied

on his movements. "Close them tight—that's no use! This glare is the worst thing for you."

Joceline's last defences fell under that hushed but virile voice. There was something comforting in those supple hands supporting hers, the finger-tips pressed against her wrists. She could feel the strong beat of his pulse and an odd tingling in her veins, a current that slowly mounted her arm, quickening her circulation.

"All imagination!" she thought.

Nevertheless, the tense strain behind her eyes that had felt like a cord drawing them back was slowly relaxing, bringing peace. She slipped into a half-dream, lulled by the drowsy heat.

Trench looked down at the hands he held, with the blue veins too visible beneath the transparent skin, and the filbert nails devoid of colour. Then his glance travelled upwards; to her neck, wasted yet still well-shaped, thanks to the smallness of the bones; to the face that, in repose, might have been that of a young saint, worn out by long vigils, violet shadows under the eyes. His heart sank. Was it too late? Finally, he studied her mouth, with its sensitive upper lip, the lower one pale, yet full, no longer repressed, but promising all that Nature bequeathed to her children.

With an effort he controlled his thoughts, concentrating his strong will, as the slow minutes ticked away.

"It's going," he breathed.

Joceline stirred.

"It's gone!" She opened her blue eyes and stared up at him, bewildered.

"Don't move!" he spoke quickly. "Just a few seconds

longer... Now!" There was triumph in the word. Reluctantly, he dropped her hands.

She saw that his face looked strained under the healthy tan. He straightened his back as a man will when he fights against fatigue. Impulsively she voiced her thoughts:

"I oughtn't to have let you! I believe you have the headache now? Sure?" For he had shaken his head. "But how do you do it? It's marvellous."

"That's my secret." He smiled at her. "I guess I won't give it away—my one parlour trick!"

"It isn't Coué?"

"No, it's mine." He was watching, with a touch of excitement, the faint colour in her cheeks. She seemed to him to have "come alive," like the old story of Galatea. He had breathed life into her with the ardour of his secret love. That chiselled face, which was meant to be young, but had given its strength to— He checked himself, a cold hand on his heart.

For suddenly the girl stiffened; the happy light died out of her eyes. A clock in the town had struck the hour, four dull notes, still vibrating.

"I must go." She rose to her feet. "But—thank you very much."

"One minute—there's something I want to say." He spoke rather breathlessly. "You oughtn't to get these headaches. Don't you ever take a walk? I see you driving with your mother, but that isn't exercise."

She looked at him with the old expression, reserved and incurious.

"I haven't much time. Not during the cure."

"But when she's at the Baths?" he urged, and threw discretion to the winds. He might never get this chance again. "I know it's dull walking alone. Come with me? I'd show you the woods. They're fine—you'd love them. I'd be so proud."

She looked past him deliberately, her arched brows drawn together.

"I can't. As it is—" She broke off.

He came a step nearer her.

"What's taken you now?" he asked. "There's something wrong. You might tell me."

She was seized by a sense of ingratitude, for there was a hurt note in his voice.

"I'm afraid that my mother—" She started again. "My mother has not moved with the times. She wouldn't, for instance, approve—"

It was impossible to explain. But Trench boldly finished the sentence:

"Of this afternoon? I understand. But of course that's our affair. If you wish it"—he swallowed hard—"we haven't met and we haven't spoken. I don't want to be a nuisance." He drew himself up to his full height.

"Oh, please—" Her upper lip quivered. She could not tell him of Mrs. Verney's strange peculiarity: her jealous mistrust of any young man who was attracted to the girl. She fell back on the obvious excuse. "Perhaps, if you knew some one here who could introduce you—properly?"

"Is that it?" His face cleared. Suddenly he laughed outright, remembering Mrs. Bickersteth. "If I can work that," he countered, "will you come for a walk with me? It's not sheer selfishness, but I've seen—I gather—" In

his turn he broke off nervously. "You should think of yourself more," he told her. "Why can't you come during the hour of your mother's bath?"

"But that's at 8.30," she protested.

"I know. I mean, it couldn't be better, as I go to mine at 7.00. I'll be right here on the terrace. You've only got to hunt round for me."

"Well, I'll see." She turned away.

He walked with her as far as the door. On the threshold she hesitated. Her blue eyes searched his face.

"I do feel better. Really, I do."

"That's fine," said Trench simply, and stepped back into the sunshine.

When she had vanished through the lounge, he went to the deserted chair and threw himself into it, his brown head where her fair one had lain. Was there a faint perfume, aromatic and haunting, from her hair? His hands gripped the cane arms and his mouth set obstinately.

"I don't care," he said to himself. "I'm going on. She's worth it!"

Meanwhile Joceline mounted the stairs, disdaining the use of the lift. At the top she paused. Although it was only the first floor, she was breathless, her heart thumping.

"Yes, I do want exercise," she decided. "I'm thoroughly out of condition. But fancy his noticing that?"

She bit her lip and hurried down the corridor to her room, which was opposite her mother's. It faced the north and seemed always cheerless, shut into the angle of the porch. Once inside, she locked the door, with a nervous glance at her travelling clock, opened her trunk and dived

down for a small flannel-covered board and an electric iron. She connected the latter with one of the lights and, moving to the window, took down two pairs of silver-grey stockings, hanging on a primitive line, and a row of little handkerchiefs in fine lawn with a tulle border. Soon she was busy ironing.

But as she neatly damped and pressed, her mind was divided. The adventure on the terrace appeared more than ever grotesque. To sit there, eyes closed, and let a stranger hold her hands! Faint amusement warred with her pride. What ever would her mother have said? Yet the memory of the young man's kindness, the honesty of his clear eyes, and his boyish triumph in success persisted and brought a feeling of sunshine into the narrow, grey room. She was stirred out of her lethargy; even her hands seemed quicker and soon the task was completed. Carefully she removed all traces of her guilt and replaced the electric globe.

"Though the hotel people charge quite enough to make this justifiable," she decided, stifling a qualm of conscience.

She carried the little pile of lawn and silk across the deserted corridor. Her mother's room, when she entered it, was filled with a warm green light from the closed shutters that made her think for a second of the shady woods. That walk proposed by Trench? She frowned as she opened the wardrobe and took down a dress for her mother to wear, laying it with other trifles across a chair, searched for a chamois leather and polished the backs of the tortoise-shell brushes with their gold monograms, costly like all Mrs. Verney's appointments.

Glancing up, she caught sight of herself in the mirror, a faint colour in her cheeks.

"Why, I even *look* better," she thought. "But how dull my hair is getting!"

Her eyes fell on a bottle of brilliantine and swerved to the clock. Yes, there was time for it. Back she went to her own room, the little bottle in her hand—her mother's special brilliantine made up with the scent she preferred.

Out came the tortoise-shell pins and the great coil, like a golden serpent, fell to below her waist. She began to brush it vigorously, over the towel pinned round her shoulders, feeling an odd sense of pleasure.

"It's beautiful still." Her lips curved.

Somewhere, deep down in her, vanity had stirred to life.

A sudden distaste for the way in which she was wont to arrange it seized her, a flower of the tiny seed of rebellion implanted by that strange young man. Instead of drawing it back from her temples into the classical knot so long approved by Mrs. Verney, Joceline parted the gleaming mass, leaving it loose above her ears and wound the rest round her small head.

Now she looked quite different. The soft background gave to her face a new expression, of wistful youth.

"Like a moth," she thought, "with fluffy wings, instead of a hard, little beetle!"

She laughed, and the sound startled her. On the heels of it came another. A car was drawing up at the porch with the harsh grinding of the brakes. She peered out and turned to fly. Her mother—and no one to receive her!

When, breathless, she reached the hall, she saw Mrs. Verney, standing alone, loosening the fastening of her cloak.

"Oh, there you are!" Her voice was pettish. "I'm very tired, Joceline."

Her daughter helped her into the lift.

"I hope you haven't gone too far."

"A little," Mrs. Verney conceded, as she settled herself on the velvet seat. She lowered her voice, for Joceline alone, as the boy began to work the ropes. "The drive was quite beautiful, but Lady Carnedin would talk! There's nothing so tiring as having to listen—the perpetual strain of attention." Her dark eyes ran over the girl. "Whatever have you done to your hair?"

"I've been brushing it," Joceline evaded.

"The style, I mean." The old lady spoke sharply. "So untidy! It doesn't suit you. Yours is the classical type. You can't afford vagaries."

The lift stopped and they got out.

"I wanted a change," said the girl.

Something in the tone she employed arrested Mrs. Verney's attention. She leaned still more heavily on her daughter's arm, her steps dragging.

Joceline gave her an anxious glance.

"You're tired out! You must lie down." She was glad when they reached the south room.

Mrs. Verney, in silence, gave herself up to the girl's ministrations. Soon she was peacefully in bed, watching the other fold her clothes and light the spirit-lamp under the kettle. Joceline, moving noiselessly, drew a table to her mother's side and arranged the contents of the little

tea-hamper, taking from their cardboard box the cakes she had bought that morning at Guyot's.

After the first cup, Mrs. Verney became conversational, where she lay, propped up against the pillows.

"That's refreshing. Thank you, darling. Where did you go this afternoon? I hope you had a pleasant walk."

"I never moved off the terrace," Joceline confessed. "I was feeling lazy and it was so lovely in the sunshine."

"A walk would have done you more good." Mrs. Verney scrutinized her. "Did you find any friends to talk to?"

"They were all out." Joceline bent to refill the little teapot. It was true in substance, yet she realized her evasion. "So I took a sun-bath, then came in and got your stockings and hankies ready. There they are!" She pointed to the little pile beyond her on the chest of drawers.

"I see them. Thank you, my child." Mrs. Verney put out a tiny hand and patted the girl's arm. "You're a good daughter." Her voice was caressing. "I never could have lived without you through all these lonely years. Kiss me, darling." She raised her face.

Joceline, her own wistful, responded. Well, she had her mother's love—that was the thought in her heart as she pressed the soft cheek with her lips.

She felt the frail arms tighten round her.

"My pretty Joceline." A hand stole up and smoothed back the loose hair on her temples. "Ah, that's more like you now." Mrs. Verney's eyes approved. "You'll do it

the old way for dinner, to please your mother, won't you, dear?"

She expected immediate acquiescence and frowned when Joceline hesitated.

"But I like it this way," the girl protested. "It makes my head feel lighter, without the weight on the back of my neck. I believe it gives me my headaches."

"All nerves," her mother said lightly. "But I shan't insist, though I was thinking that Mlle. Carline may not be pleased. To be copied, I mean. It will make me feel uncomfortable—the French are so quick to notice these things." A grain of malice came into her eyes. "And she must be many years your junior. It's a pretty style—for a young girl."

"But I'm not so old." Joceline's lips tightened.

She lifted the kettle to fill up the tea-pot. Her hand trembled and the jet of water exceeded its aim.

"Take care!" said Mrs. Verney sharply. "I don't want to have to pay for the polish. The bills are ruinous as it is. You can take my cup—I've finished—and leave the things to wash later." She lowered herself in the bed. "I'm dreadfully tired," she complained. "All this is very bad for my heart. I shall try and get a little sleep."

"Shall I read to you?" the girl inquired, for often Mrs. Verney found that the soft voice induced slumber.

"No, I'd sooner be alone."

Joceline went out and closed the door.

When she reached her own quarters, she stood, her hands clenched, staring out of the window. Full well she understood what had caused the change in her par-

ent's manner. Her love of power had received a check.

"And it will drag on, hour after hour," she told herself wearily. "It isn't worth it. After all, what does it matter how I look?"

Yet her feeling of rebellion persisted. It deepened as, across the space before the hotel, she caught sight of a man, young and vigorous, approaching the steps with a swinging stride. He looked so free and full of life. In his hand was a conical white parcel, obviously from the florist. A sudden suspicion shot into her mind, half-dread, half-amusement.

"He couldn't!" she breathed.

But presently, there came a tap at her door.

When she opened it, a *chasseur* stood there, the smallest of three, her devoted slave.

"For you, mademoiselle," he said proudly.

"For me? You're sure?" she asked the boy.

"But certainly, mademoiselle." He gave her an admiring glance, bowed from the waist and retreated.

Joceline opened the paper folds. Inside was a bunch of carnations, heavy-headed, filled with perfume. As she bent her head to enjoy it, she saw the corner of a card. Nervously she drew it forth.

It was plain, but obliquely across it ran a line hastily written in pencil: "Have you ever read Walden?"

No name. That was all.

Joceline stared down bewildered. This stranger, to send her flowers? He must be mad! Then she recalled that, in all the American novels she knew, flowers were an every-day occurrence. The young man always sent a bouquet to the girl he had met in the train at the mercy

of a villain, or saved from a gang of crooks! And always the same—"American Beauties!"

"I suppose he couldn't get them at Bagnoles," she thought, with a tilt of her lips. "He'd be hurt to death if I refused them. But I seem to be getting deeper and deeper. And what does he mean by 'Walden'?"

Suddenly the light broke in. Walden—the woods! Their walk together? Clever! Her eyes sparkled.

Why not? She was getting old, as her mother plainly hinted. Already in the eyes of the French, she had "coiffed St. Catherine." But age had its privileges—so her rebellious thoughts ran on. No longer a girl, she could do as she liked. In any case, she must thank him, and this was difficult to accomplish under her mother's watchful eyes. On the terrace then, at 8.00 to-morrow? She did not realize that Trench had followed the same line of thought.

She arranged the flowers on the mantelpiece, lingering happily over the task. How beautiful they were, not the stiff, pink ones suggesting paper, but of all colours, with curled petals, regal on their long stalks.

"And I don't believe he's rich," she thought. "Somehow, he doesn't look it. It is kind." Her heart was touched.

Nevertheless, a sense of deceit vis-à-vis to her mother troubled her and she sought for atonement. Once more she took down her hair, brushed it back from her face, and secured it in the heavy knot above the nape of her neck.

"Plain Jane, aping Greece," she summed up the effect and sighed. Then wondered at her new reluctance.

Why should she mind? What had happened to ruffle the stagnant current in which she had drifted these many years?

Suddenly Trench's words re-echoed in her ears: "You should think of yourself more." Another memory awoke, from under the shadow of the War, a doctor's trenchant remark, "Anything to take your daughter out of herself. Keep her well employed," and Mrs. Verney's eager approval. A month later Elise had gone and Joceline had assumed her duties, already coached by the clever maid.

The two verdicts were conflicting. Which was the right one? In a flash the girl realized her complete absorption in the life of her parent. The price of it had been her youth. Yet the whole truth was still denied her, that factor which had forced Trench into the open field against the dictates of his pride.

Joceline straightened the last carnation and her thoughts turned to the woods.

At six, when she entered the opposite room, the old lady was placidly sleeping. Joceline bent over her and kissed the delicate pink cheek. Mrs. Verney stirred and opened her eyes, vaguely at first, then into them stole a quick touch of triumph as they rested on Joceline's hair.

"Well, dear one"—her voice was bright—"I've had a doze, just a few minutes, and I'm feeling much better. That poor Lady Carnedin! So kind, but so shallow, and without the slightest sense of humour. But you can see that in her clothes! A face like a unicorn and she wears a picture hat!" She added with a grain of malice, "I think sometimes the Almighty must smile to see what

centuries have evolved from his beautiful, bare Eve, and her— You're not listening, Joceline?"

"I was trying to picture it." The girl paused in her endeavour to collect the scattered tea-things. "A unicorn? So she is. Isn't it time you began to dress? I've put out your violet silk. Is that right?"

Mrs. Verney thought for a moment.

"Yes, I shan't go out after dinner. I must really get a cloak to match it. We'll play bridge with Eugénie and Mme. de Mesnil."

Joceline's heart sank.

"And the little Carline?" she suggested.

"Oh, no." Mrs. Verney got out of bed. "That child doesn't play well enough. Besides, we shall be four without her. Now, dear, ring for the hot water." She slipped her feet into the pair of satin *mules* and pattered across to the dressing-table. Joceline, in the mirror, could see her raising the skin delicately at either side of her eyes with her finger-tips, smoothing out the faint lines. "These curls are full of dust. That's the worst of motoring! You can get out my second set, and give me my face-cream too. It's locked in my dressing-case—I don't fancy the chambermaid's fingers! Thanks." She took it and smiled at her daughter. "I'm glad you've followed my advice. Classical—that's your style. Not like your poor old mother who needs so much, in the way of dress and soft effects, to make herself presentable."

She paused. This time Joceline was ready.

"How absurd! Why, you know how every one admires you here."

"Silly child!" The old lady was pleased. "Still, you

get your features from your father. Your hair too—" She broke off frowning. "Where is my brilliantine?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry." Joceline looked guilty. "I borrowed it this afternoon. I only took very little. I'll fetch it."

"Well, I'll forgive you this time"—Mrs. Verney sounded aggrieved—"but you should get some of your own."

"I've no money," Joceline murmured.

"That's an empty excuse," her mother told her. "You know that I buy you all you want."

The girl's hand closed sharply on the tree which she was extracting from a violet satin shoe with a beautiful paste buckle. She looked up, her face a mask, when the chambermaid tapped at the door.

"Take it from her," said Mrs. Verney. "I don't want her in now."

Joceline retrieved the can of hot water and placed it on the washing-stand.

"Is there anything more I can do, mother?"

She stood, tall and rather rigid, watching Mrs. Verney remove the dust of her drive with the perfumed cream on a little square of fine linen. At last it was over. Her mother turned.

"Do? No, thank you, darling. Go and make yourself pretty now. Not that brown dress—the pale rose one. It will tone with my violet." She smiled up into the other's still face, her head a little on one side. "I've been thinking, child, that you ought to have something new yourself. To-morrow, if I'm well enough, we'll stroll down to that little shop where they often have such charming models.

You're slim and we're sure to find something to fit you. You'd like that?" Her manner was gracious.

Joceline managed to smile, although the thoughts in her heart were bitter.

"I don't need it, mother dear. And you have so many expenses here."

"Then we'll be reckless for once!" Mrs. Verney nodded gaily. "You know how I love to spoil you. Now run away or you'll be late in coming back to do my hair."

Late they were, but it was not Joceline's fault. As they stood waiting for the lift, Mrs. Verney's sharp eyes, watching its downward flight, detected a solitary passenger. The gates flew open and Trench could be seen, flattening himself against the side to let the pair pass him. They settled themselves on the seat, Joceline with her shoulder turned to the other occupant. Her heart was beating quickly and she felt a curious shame. But Trench never looked at her.

When they reached the hall, he dawdled behind. Outside the dining-room door Joceline fell back a pace, making way for her parent. As Mrs. Verney moved forward, the girl looked swiftly over her shoulder. She gave Trench a little nod, in which he read shy gratitude.

The young man breathed a sigh of relief.

Later, as he sat at his table chatting with Mrs. Bickersteth, he saw the blue eyes steal across and swerve quickly to his neighbour.

For Mrs. Verney had caught the glance.

"Isn't that some one new?" she asked and scrutinized the elderly lady.

"She was here last night," Joceline responded. "Besides, don't you remember the ring?"

"Of course," Mrs. Verney nodded. "Somehow I couldn't place her. My dear, do look at that comb! Exactly like a five-barred gate at the end of a field of turnips!" She gave her soft, tinkling laugh. "Still, she holds herself well. But I wonder what she can see in that rather common young man who tried to talk to us in the train."

Now her eyes were on Joceline's face. The girl looked up indifferently.

"He didn't strike me as common."

"With that accent?" Mrs. Verney stared. "I suppose in these days, since the War," she said after a short pause, "when there's such a dearth of young men, girls are not so particular. A pity." Her words were edged. "They risk being—misunderstood."

A sudden wave of rebellion swept over Joceline. It was several years since her mother had talked to her in this fashion and it brought back tense memories. A new strength seemed to come to her and she lifted her head proudly.

"Then it must be a consolation to you that I'm no longer a girl," she responded. Her voice was not bitter, merely amused. "Now, mother, a little more wine?"

She raised the bottle as she spoke. To her annoyance, her hand shook. It did not escape the sharp eyes, darkened by a touch of anger.

"Those nerves of yours!" Mrs. Verney murmured. "You should learn to control them. Your own fault. You sit about doing nothing, instead of taking exercise."

To her surprise, Joceline smiled.

"Well, to-morrow I'll mend my ways and go for a walk early, whilst you're busy with your bath."

"That's my good daughter," said Mrs. Verney. Joceline waited, for there was thought in that smooth brow between its rolls of snowy hair. She felt a little thrill of fear. Had her mother divined the whole project, read in her mind the word, Walden? She experienced distinct relief when the latter added pensively, "You can take that note to the Villa des Fleurs—I shan't put a stamp on it—and if they're in wait for an answer."

CHAPTER III

RS. BICKERSTETH, booted and spurred, was ready for her first bath.

It had been an effort, rising so early, but now she was dressed, down to her gloves, her hat pinned firmly on her head—she had never achieved the modern custom of putting her head into her hat—and was giving Piper last instructions. For the old nurse had insisted on being "handy" when her mistress emerged from the ordeal.

"You'll see me in the Pump Room, ma'am, with one of the picnic-hamper glasses. The ones they use don't look clean to me. Now, ma'am! It's time for the hotel bus."

They found it waiting at the door and Mrs. Bickersteth clambered in. There was only one occupant, in a voluminous duffle cloak with a hood that screened the wearer's face, the costume suggesting an Arab's burnous. Mrs. Bickersteth, subsiding, was aware of bright eyes surveying her from under the disguising folds, and the suggestion of snowy curls. She recognized Mrs. Verney.

The day before, she had been too harassed by her new doctor's visit—quite a young man, though stout and bearded, so different from her "dear old Spalding"—and the details of her treatment, to carry out her original project. Here was the opportunity.

She leaned forward, with a smile.

"Mrs. Verney, isn't it? I don't expect you remember

me," she said in her slow pleasant voice, "but we met many years ago." She added vaguely, "Down in Norfolk."

"Indeed?" The old lady sounded frigid.

Mrs. Bickersteth, secure in her position as mistress of Torlish Manor and secretly amused, persisted.

"I was staying with the Pulteneys—they're connections of ours—at Sinnington and you came to a tennis-party."

"The Pulteneys?" Mrs. Verney unthawed. "Really? How strange! Do tell me your name?" Mrs. Bickersteth pronounced it. "But of course. How stupid of me! My memory is not what it was. Still, that must have been before—" She paused.

Mrs. Bickersteth nodded.

"In 1913, my last visit. Somehow, during the War one lost touch with distant friends. It's a long journey from Devonshire. And I never want to leave home," she added comfortably. "It really was quite a wrench to come here for the cure, but every one said I must, after a bad attack of phlebitis."

A Frenchman languidly mounted the step, a muffler about his unshaven chin. Under his travelling coat, Mrs. Bickersteth caught a glimpse of pink flannel. Pyjamas? She was horrified.

"Well, I think you're wise," Mrs. Verney responded. "The treatment is wonderful. I've been here now three seasons running, for my heart," she explained. "And it always sets me up. We came on from Mentone, where we usually spend the cold months, so I haven't seen our neighbours lately. Sinnington is five miles from us, on the other side of the Scropes' place, now, alas, in strange hands!" Her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "I suppose

you heard of Sir Roland's death? Sad, but the War left many gaps."

"Indeed, yes." Mrs. Bickersteth sighed. "I remember him." She hesitated, then yielded to curiosity. "It must have been a great shock to your daughter?"

"In a sense. Of course they were childhood friends." She saw Mrs. Bickersteth's air of surprise. "Ah, you didn't hear? The engagement was broken off, a year before poor Roland was killed. I was thankful afterwards. It would have been worse if they had married. Still, my dear daughter suffered. She had not got over her father's death and my own serious illness. But don't let's go back to those sad times." Effectively she evaded Mrs. Bickersteth's ready sympathy. "You like Bagnoles and our hotel?" she asked in a brisker voice.

"I think so—though I dread the cure," Mrs. Bickersteth confessed with a smile at her own cowardice. "The French doctors seem so ruthless! Ah, we're off at last." For the omnibus had begun to move. "I wonder if you would help me? My doctor said that he would see me this morning at the Establishment, but I don't know if I ought to find him before I take my treatment or after?"

"Neither." Mrs. Verney smiled. "He'll come and see you in your bath."

"In my bath!" Mrs. Bickersteth gasped. "You can't mean—" Words failed her.

Mrs. Verney repressed a desire to laugh.

"It's the custom. They think nothing of it."

"But I should!" The scandalized victim felt inclined to jump out of the bus. Whatever would Piper say?

She became aware suddenly of the Frenchman, observ-

ing her with a twinkle in his eye. How dreadful! He understood English. She recovered her dignity.

"I'll tell you what to do." Mrs. Verney whispered soothingly. "A little French friend of mine advised me when I first came here. Get a box of powdered starch and scatter a handful in the water. It makes it opaque—so much nicer. I'll lend you some of mine to-day, as soon as we get there. Then you'll be quite happy."

"How kind of you." Mrs. Bickersteth tried to feel reassured. "It's such a business, isn't it?" She was pursuing her train of thought. "All this dressing and undressing."

"But you shouldn't trouble. The French are more sensible. I had this made especially"—she fingered the creamy duffle—"but any warm coat will do. Then you're ready to lie down when you return, and you get up properly for lunch."

"I see." Mrs. Bickersteth nodded back. "I'm afraid it wouldn't quite suit me, though on you it's so picturesque."

The old lady looked pleased.

"It's not easy to dress at my age, but one does what one can," she said airily. "Now, with my daughter, it's different. She can wear anything."

"She's so pretty," observed her companion. "Although she doesn't look over-strong."

Mrs. Verney glanced up sharply.

"It's her nerves, poor child. She's perfectly healthy otherwise. And such a good daughter. I can't tell you what's she been to me since my husband's death. Have you any young people?" she enquired.

"Three girls—we lost our son in the war. Two of them are married now, but I've still got my baby at home. She will be twenty in August." She seemed to read the other's thought. "All the same, I hope she'll marry. I'd like to feel that when we're gone she'd be spared the loneliness—" She broke off, aware, too late, that this would be Miss Verney's portion. "Though nowadays," she amended, "girls seem to find plenty to do."

Mrs. Verney smiled back.

"The new generation is rather amazing. I sometimes think we're very old-fashioned, my daughter and I. Joceline is entirely happy in her quiet life with me and our wanderings in the sunshine. We have so many tastes in common."

The omnibus slowed down to enter the gates of the Thermal Establishment. On their right was another big hotel that overshadowed the laid-out gardens, through which ran a shallow stream, and, facing them, were wooded heights traversed by shady paths with seats at intervals, where the patients took their exercise, in accordance with their régime.

"Here we are," said Mrs. Verney.

She got out, helped by the porter, and waited for Mrs. Bickersteth.

"You will find the baths very pleasant," she said. "The water has no smell and it only makes your skin tingle. I quite enjoy them. Now come with me and I'll give you the powder." She added, with real sympathy, "You'll soon get accustomed to your doctor, though it's rather like going to school again!"

Mrs. Bickersteth was surprised. She had not imagined

that Mrs. Verney could be so kind and considerate. She succumbed to the other's charm. When they parted, to enter the little rooms assigned to them, the younger woman felt that she had gained a friend. No wonder the daughter was devoted. Under that rather frivolous manner, her mother hid a generous heart.

"All the same," she thought later, as she lay in the warm water, clouded and milky with the chalk, an ear strained for the doctor's step, "youth needs youth to be perfectly happy and I like that young man."

She stiffened. There came a sharp tap at the door. "Entrez!" said Mrs. Bickersteth weakly.

Freed from the dread of the unknown—she had kept the whole truth from Piper—after a sunny afternoon spent mainly on the terrace, Mrs. Bickersteth enjoyed her dinner and gossiped unceasingly with Trench. His place had been vacant at lunch, as he had gone off on a long tramp, returning by Couterne. He drew a picture for her of the château, turreted and imposing, with its walls lapped by the water, where, in the sixteenth century, Margaret of Navarre's pet poet had poured out his heart to her.

"You must go there," he said. "It's worth seeing and it's only a short walk from the Baths. How did you get on to-day?"

"I've been talking to the Verneys. What a charming old lady she is! She introduced her daughter to me after tea, but I found her more difficult to get on with. Very quiet."

The young man nodded.

"To-night," said Mrs. Bickersteth, "if you'll keep a chair for me outside, I think I'll have my coffee there. It's quite like summer, isn't it?"

Trench willingly agreed. He glanced at the central table. The Verneys were rising. He watched them depart, then stood up in his turn.

"You'll find me at your end of the terrace—trying to sit in two chairs at once!" he told his new friend boyishly.

He seemed in very good spirits to-night. Mrs. Bickersteth finished her ice and prepared to follow him.

In the air was a suggestion of thunder; and clouds were gathering over the woods, deepening the effect of the dusk. She joined in the throng moving towards the terrace door. In an angle of the lounge, Mrs. Verney had settled down to bridge, Joceline's place filled by a stranger, one of those formidable old dames, so often to be found in France, who seem, with the passing of the years, to shed their feminity and become more masculine than their grandsons. The girl was nowhere to be seen, but when Mrs. Bickersteth stepped out on to the red tiles she found her by the parapet, gazing silently over the lake.

"All alone?" The elderly lady halted by her side. "Come and have coffee with me to-night?" She slipped a hand through Joceline's arm. "I'm not up to walking yet, so we'll sit down and have a chat."

Avoiding the promenaders, they made their way to the far corner, where Trench was guarding a table and chairs.

He rose eagerly at their approach, darting a swift glance at the girl.

Mrs. Bickersteth, beaming, introduced him.

"Pleased to meet you," said Trench gravely. "Won't you take this chair, Miss Verney?"

"But it's yours." Joceline repressed a smile, meeting the mischief in his eyes.

"I'd sooner stand," he insisted, and the two ladies settled themselves.

"Now, isn't this nice?" Mrs. Bickersteth was elated by the success of her scheme. "I can't understand how any one can stay indoors on a night like this."

"And play bridge," Joceline observed. "I was so thankful to see our champion arrive this afternoon. Now the table's complete without me. She was here last year and we heard of her prowess beforehand, but we didn't realize her sex. We put her down as an old soldier—instead of his widow! When we were introduced to 'Madame la générale,' as they call her, it was a trying moment! You can guess how we laughed afterwards. Especially as she's so—so virile!"

"Even to a moustache," chuckled Trench. "I was wondering who she could be. She barked at me in the lounge when I got in her way: 'Eh bien, monsieur?'" He mimicked her. "I very nearly forgot and saluted!"

"'The General' would have liked that. I believe the only person here who is not afraid of her is my mother. But she plays an excellent game of bridge."

"You're not fond of it yourself?" the elderly lady suggested, as the waiter threaded his way to them, the coffeetray balanced on one hand.

"Not in France," said the girl. "They're so terribly in earnest! It seems to arouse the national economy, and they hate to lose, which makes me nervous."

"I expect you'd sooner play tennis?" Mrs. Bickersteth was pursuing her plan. She was surprised by the silence that fell on the pair. "I wonder if there are nightingales here?" She filled up the coffee cups.

"Yes, in the forest," Trench answered. "I heard one there the other night." He was getting accustomed to his neighbour's swift transitions, but he did not guess that this change of subject was due to her romantic thoughts.

"We must go and find them one evening," she said, when I'm allowed exercise."

A fugitive breeze stirred the bushes, wafting the scent of syringa to them. The darkness deepened, veiling the hills. The lake was pale indigo, under a sky packed with clouds, and Joceline looked up at them.

"We shall have a storm before morning."

Mrs. Bickersteth nodded.

"I'm afraid so, though it's turning cooler." She laid down her empty cup. "I really think I must get a wrap."

"I'll fetch it." Trench moved. "Please? Just tell me where to find it?"

"You're very kind"—Mrs. Bickersteth rose—"but I want to go in. There's something I forgot to tell Piper. Perhaps you'd keep my chair for me? I shan't be long." She smiled at the two young people. "I'll come back, so don't desert me."

Off she went, sailing along like a battle-ship, her head high, with its frizzy, grey hair subdued by a net, jet comb erect, suggesting the turreted superstructure. She was well-pleased with her manœuvre.

"They'll get along better alone," she thought. "That's

a dear boy—he deserves it. And the girl is brighter without her mother."

She found Piper in her room, threading pink ribbon in a nightdress.

"You needn't go," she told the maid. "I've only come in for a few minutes. I've been talking to Miss Verney and that nice young man at the next table."

Piper looked up quickly.

"With the brown hair?"

Mrs. Bickersteth nodded.

"Ah, you've noticed it too?" Piper's gaze was averted—too late. "Now, Nanna, I won't have it." Her mistress' hand came down tenderly on her shoulder. "It's no good grieving. Our darling's gone, but there are the living who still need us." She started. "There! I've forgotten to write to Miss Adela"—she had slipped back to nursery terms—"to say that I've survived my bath! I could do it now, just a line." She glanced across to the open windows. "But first, Piper"—her voice was mysterious—"just step out quietly and tell me how they're getting on?"

Piper needed no explanation. Match-making again, she thought! Well, it would take her mind off the cure—and other painful matters. For Piper had had a shock that morning. Wandering down a corridor, she had seen a man emerge from a room, holding the door half-open, and bow to a lady in her bath! And the lady had airily waved her hand. Such goings-on and no one minding! A nurse had passed at the very moment. Still, Piper had always heard that the French were an immoral race. She had tried to forget it during the War.

"Well?" Mrs. Bickersteth was curious when the old maid came in out of the dark.

"It's not easy to see, ma'am, but if it's the two in the corner they've got their chairs side by side and the young gentleman is talking."

Mrs. Bickersteth nodded, satisfied.

She would have been immensely surprised had she overheard the conversation. For Trench was saying to the girl:

"I was afraid you might be tired. It was rather an uphill climb, not at all the walk I'd planned. But then, there was that note to leave. To-morrow we'll go into the woods on the way to La Ferté-Macé. The real woods."

Joceline smiled.

"Walden?" For already this had become one of the catchwords dear to youth. "I didn't say I would go to-morrow."

"But you will?" His voice was pleading. "I'll show you a perfectly lovely path that leads to a grass cutting where all sorts of flowers grow. Besides"—in the dim light, she saw the white line of his teeth, as he laughed quietly—"that was our bargain, wasn't it? When I'd been 'properly' introduced!"

The girl stirred uneasily, evading a direct reply.

"How could you say you were 'pleased to meet' me?"

"It was the honest truth. I'm always pleased to meet you, and that made the fifth time. In a certain sense." He was thinking backwards. "First"—he touched his thumb, counting—"on the boat, coming over. Then—" She interrupted him, surprised.

"On the boat? I remember you in the Calais train, when you got down the roll of rugs for my mother."

"And was frozen stiff," he interposed.

"Were you?" she asked innocently. "But it wasn't as cold as all that."

"I mean by the way your mother said, 'Thank you.' As if she were handing me a *pourboire!* And you wouldn't even look at me."

"Well, in England, you see-"

He caught her up.

"But I'm English too. Did you think I wasn't?" He laughed at the quick movement which betrayed her mistake.

"I thought you were Californian?"

"I only live there and share in a ranch. I'm Britishborn—Rugby, Cambridge and the War from start to finish. Then two years in my father's office, learning to be a solicitor. On his death, I got my chance—though I don't mean that exactly. The old man was very good to me, gave in about my going to Cambridge, and, again, when I threw it up and enlisted. So I'm glad now that I stuck it, instead of cutting adrift at once. But I simply loathed the law and being tied to an office stool." His voice quickened. "Now I'm free. There's nothing on earth to beat freedom."

In the silence, he heard distinctly the little catch of her breath as she checked a sigh. The slim hand on the arm of her chair had tightened convulsively. But when she spoke her voice was quiet.

"Yes, I think a man ought to be free."

"A woman too. I don't believe—oh, well it's difficult to explain." He was skating on thin ice, and he knew it. Her very stillness was a warning. He started again. "I've always thought that the Ten Commandments could have done with another. If we've got to honour our parents, why shouldn't they respect us, in turn? As individuals, and not as possessions. Seems to me too one-sided. Mind you, in America they give youth a freer hand. At least that's been my conclusion, judging from the men I've met."

"Perhaps." Her hands were folded now tranquilly in her lap.

There followed a little silence. His eyes, accustomed to the darkness, studied her profile. Head averted, she stared at the mist obscuring the lake. How loyal she was! He loved her for it, yet it raised a barrier between them.

"You don't agree," he asked at last. "I mean with my Eleventh Commandment?"

"In theory, yes. But it isn't so simple. Men are free because they've been taught how to work and become financially independent, whereas most women are supported. They can't choose their own lives—though in the War some got a chance."

"Did you do any war-work?" he asked.

She stiffened.

"I couldn't at first. My father died, and my mother was ill and needed me. Then I had a breakdown myself. Later I tried, but it proved a failure."

"Hard luck," Trench murmured. "I suppose you weren't strong enough?"

There was such a ring of sympathy in his lowered voice that she turned to glance at him, surprised.

"Oh, no. I'm not delicate. It was a stupid accident. I joined a party of haymakers—girls. We went round to help the farmers when all the men were being called up. I loved it, the happy life in the open, until I managed to strain a sinew and went dead-lame, no use at all! So then I had to go home."

It seemed to him that she stopped abruptly. His intuition filled the gap. Mrs. Verney had disapproved of the plan and had triumphed over its non-success.

"And every one said 'I told you so'?" He nodded comprehensively. "That's the limit, isn't it?"

"Well, it put a check to anything further, except the old village committees."

Her lips were tight. Once again the distant scene rose before her of that ignominious journey home, the coldness of her mother's welcome and the long weeks of punishment. She had gone off, against her parent's will—the unforgivable offence—and the net had closed tighter than ever, even her slender allowance docked. Since then she had been obliged to beg for the small change in her purse, utterly in the tyrant's power. But no one had ever known! This was the salve to her pride. Only Trench had guessed a part. This hurt her, yet the man was a stranger, would go out of her life, and she was lonely. His sympathy and understanding broke the monotony of her days.

The terrace now was deserted. Through the glass door of the lounge, a little circle of warm light fell on the tiled pavement, rendering the darkness still more opaque. The garden below seemed mysterious. Not a leaf moved in

the sultry air. Beyond the lake a black curtain had fallen, obscuring the pastoral scene. Suddenly this was ripped across by the dagger thrust of the lightning. Joceline started as the thunder came galloping over the range of hills.

In the tense silence that followed it, a voice hailed them from above. Mrs. Bickersteth was standing in her operabox.

"I'm so sorry, but I was kept," she told them breath-lessly. "I forgot a letter and had to write it. And now it's no use my joining you. We're going to have a dreadful storm. You'd better come in at once," she fussed. "There's the rain!" For a heavy drop had splashed down on her hand. "Come in! Good night." She was retreating.

"Good night," they echoed, and heard the snap of the shutters closing.

"I'd forgotten her," Trench confessed. But the girl had already risen and was moving forward hastily. "Look out!" She had narrowly missed a table. "You'll hurt yourself." His hand felt for her elbow and grasped it. "This side. There's no hurry. That storm is miles away."

"But it's late," she breathed, as he guided her through the open space near the parapet. "I'd forgotten the time."

Trench smiled. Then he frowned. She seemed to live under a perpetual shadow of reproof. Still he mustn't get her into trouble. When they came to the circle of light, he halted.

"I think I'll stay here and watch the lightning until it really begins to rain," he told her, and felt her tension slacken.

"Good night then." She held out her hand.

As his long fingers closed on it, a flash of lightning lit up the terrace and she caught a swift vision of his face. She slipped from him like a ghost before he had time to open the door.

Once inside, she paused for a second, dazzled by the sudden brilliance, and gave an anxious glance around her. Her mother was absorbed in bridge, shrewdly appraising the cards she held. Joceline made her way to the lift. Soon she was safe in her own room. Unconsciously she moved to the glass and stared, breathless, into it.

She saw a white face, under the dead-gold hair, stirred by the night air into a halo, the blue eyes wide with fear.

"Oh, not again!" she cried in her heart. "I couldn't bear it. It would kill me."

Outside the window voices rose in shrill and excited French; a party, returning from the Casino, hurrying before the rain. Then silence, broken by the thunder.

Gradually her composure returned and brought with it a sense of proportion. It might have been imagination, that look in the man's honest grey eyes?

"Still, after this I shall have to know him, or Mrs. Bickersteth would wonder." She took up a brush and smoothed the hair back from her troubled brows. "Then the trouble will begin. I've had my warning from mother already."

The blue eyes stared back at her, filled with a new rebellion. Was she always to be cut off from the younger generation? Trench had been right when he said that parents should respect their children. What was the secret of the power her mother held in her tiny hands?

Money!

"And I have been cheated out of mine," the girl thought. "Sold, like a slave!"

She turned away with a brusque gesture, and her eyes fell on the mantelpiece; on a single photograph, its frame touching the carnations. Her father's face looked out at her and, suddenly, she remembered her vow. Her lips trembled and into her eyes stole tears that seemed to wash away the everlasting bitterness. Anyhow, she was true to the dead. She thought of her father's last letter announcing his forthcoming leave, unaware of the fate in store: "If I can't get off, look after your mother. Remember, I trust her to you, child."

She straightened her drooping shoulders and her face took on a new expression, nobler, filled with a faint triumph. It wasn't slavery, after all, but the test of her loyalty.

She bathed her face in cold water, went across to her mother's room and saw that everything was in order. Fetching a book, she ran downstairs and slipped into a vacant chair, opened the pages and tried to read. Once she looked up. Trench had entered, raindrops sparkling on his hair. As he passed her, he gave her a tiny nod, almost imperceptible, full of a boyish friendliness. A weight lifted from her spirit.

Presently the bridge-party dissolved; Mrs. Verney, radiant, began to bid her friends good night. "The General" stalked across the lounge, gaunt in her rusty widow's weeds, to collect a subdued daughter-in-law, who obediently folded her embroidery.

Immediately the remaining trio fell into closer conver-

sation. As Joceline drew near, she could hear the Comtesse de St. Mesnil say: "The poor little one! I pity her. All these cures without result, and she has been married five years! Who knows, it may be the husband's fault? Though our old friend would not agree. She has every confidence in the waters. Let us hope, then! Bon soir, madame." They shook hands, and Mrs. Verney looked round for her daughter.

"Ah, there you are, my dear." She accepted Joceline's arm and they moved out of earshot. "I won all three rubbers," she whispered. "Thirty francs—think of that! I had 'the General' throughout for my partner."

"And now you're tired?"

"Not a bit!" The old lady swept into the lift. She opened her dainty brocade bag, sorted the soiled notes and picked out one for ten francs. "Here's a little present, darling. I always like to share my good fortune."

For a moment, Joceline hesitated. Then she murmured a word of thanks.

"Don't lose it," said Mrs. Verney, smiling. "To-morrow, when you go for the cakes, you must buy yourself some brilliantine."

CHAPTER IV

RS. BICKERSTETH, returning from a drive, recommended by the hall-porter, to the ancient Chapel of St. Ortaire, sighed as they entered the shady woods. She was troubled in spirit by the news which had reached her by post that morning.

It was only ten days since she had left Torlish Manor, but Elsie had "got round her father"—so she phrased it indignantly. And where pray, was the money to come from for this new, ridiculous scheme? All surplus income was absorbed in rates and repairs nowadays. These were cruel times for landowners.

Elsie, too, who had seemed so happy since her emergence from the schoolroom, to write about "an object in life," when of course she would marry—quite as pretty as Adela, who had been a mother herself at twenty. Absurd! Mrs. Bickersteth straightened her shoulders and blamed the "modern restlessness."

Three years at an Agricultural College and then to take over Platt's Farm, when the lease would expire, and run it herself, as a "paying proposition"? A child like that! The idea of a Bickersteth selling poultry and eggs and butter; driving in on market days and standing behind a stall in an apron? (This was her own flight of fancy.) What was the world coming to?

But Richard had always been weak with the child, since

the days of her first pony. She *could* ride, certainly, and she had an inborn love of the land, the only one of the four who kept her garden in proper order and whose rabbits never seemed to die.

"I must be just," thought her parent. "I'm really more vexed with Richard, who leaves 'the final decision' to me. So that, if I say no, I shall get all the black looks and Richard will go scot free! Isn't that a man all over?"

Suddenly she remembered that her doctor had told her she must walk for a certain distance every day; drive, if she liked, but get out in some shady place and begin to exercise her leg.

They had come to a clearing in the trees, where a grass ride led off to the right, and she called a halt.

"Attendez!" she warned the driver, and started off courageously.

What a nuisance this cure was! She ought to be home, talking seriously to Richard before the mischief went too far. One couldn't be diplomatic in letters. Elsie would "jump to conclusions."

On went Mrs. Bickersteth down the path like the neck of a bottle, her eyes glued to the ground. Another of those huge, red slugs! She avoided it, with a shudder. The woods seemed very silent. She felt quite glad that, behind her, the driver was still within hail if she should meet a local Apache. But suddenly she heard voices, a soft murmur that rose and fell, and she paused to get her breath. It came through the trees on her left. Mrs. Bickersteth was curious. She forsook the path deliberately and, with a feeling of adventure, made her way through the undergrowth.

Now she was within earshot. A man was speaking—in English too!

"Just to please me?"

She recognized the voice and peered stealthily through the low branches screening the pair beyond. There, in a little clearing, were the two young people she hoped to discover, Joceline on the mossy ground, her shoulders against the bole of an ilex, with Trench, cross-legged, facing her.

His hands were stretched out imploringly—Mrs. Bickersteth gasped! Had it come to this? For she saw the girl hesitate, then lay her delicate hands in his. The thought flashed through the onlooker's mind: "In another moment they'll kiss each other!" Panic-stricken, she retreated. It wasn't fair to spy on the lovers. But what a romance?

She breathed again when, undetected, she reached the path. Excitement had driven away her depression. Elsie must wait. There was no haste and here were these dear, impetuous young people launched on a love affair. Yes, it was more than a flirtation. The earnestness of the man's voice and the trust in Joceline's pale face, even her careless attitude as she leaned, bare-headed, against the tree, her hat on the ground beside her, spoke of the confidence bred by custom, no silly boy and girl affair.

Mrs. Bickersteth felt responsible. Her plan had succeeded beyond her hopes, but she was afraid of Mrs. Verney. It was obvious that the old lady did not approve of her daughter's friend, though Mrs. Bickersteth worked hard to bring him into the little circle.

"An absurd prejudice." She sniffed, her Roman nose

in the air, as she trudged back to the carriage. "The girl is no longer young and she's fading. He mayn't be quite her equal in birth, but he's had a first-class education. Good-looking, too"—the face of her dead son rose up and strengthened her resolution—"and if they live in California what does it matter about his people if they're not in the Verneys' set? But of course the real truth of the matter is that the old lady can't spare her." And suddenly she thought of Elsie, the last fledgling to leave the nest. "I suppose all parents are the same. It's hard to do so much for the children and then see them fly away. But one must think of the future." She had come round, full circle, to her initial problem.

Supposing Elsie remained single? She would be happy at Dobbs' Farm, a small one not far from the Manor, when the older generation had passed, with Christabel to look after her. Really, how fortunate it seemed that she had insisted on marrying her second cousin, young Henry Bickersteth, in that rather breathless fashion. For Henry was now the heir, and Elsie was fond of Christabel. Yes, perhaps there was something in the scheme? Wearily she mounted the step.

"Allez!" she said to the driver, to receive disconcertingly his response:

"To ze 'otel? Bien, madame."

Off they went, Mrs. Bickersteth leaning back in the rickety victoria. A taxi-auto cost more and, since dear Adela was helping, she must be careful of expenses. Adela had her sons to consider, as well as that darling baby. A ray of comfort came to her in the thought of the third generation. How the boys loved their summers, the

long holidays at Torlish, with Grannie and the indulgent Piper. Like many another elderly spinster, she was severe with her own sex, but weak as water with a schoolboy, forgiving all the mad pranks for the sake of a young arm tucked through hers and a gay: "Buck up, Nanna!"

Mrs. Bickersteth smiled at the thought. She must tell Piper what she had seen in the heart of the woods. Piper would be pleased. She was sorry for "that Miss Verney." She had "heard things" from Lady Carnedin's maid.

"No wonder she's so pale, ma'am," had been Piper's summing-up. "She has to massage Mrs. Verney! It's taking the strength out of her. A trained nurse once told me she gave it up for this reason. It sapped her." Piper had nodded wisely. "And she'd been through a hospital and knew what she was talking about."

But where was Mrs. Verney now, and how had the pair escaped her? Mrs. Bickersteth dimly remembered some invitation to bridge at a Villa. That was it! Joceline had taken her parent there and met Trench—by appointment! Mrs. Bickersteth chuckled, to remember that she was a mother herself. Still, she had looked ahead for her daughters and given them every chance of marriage. That was a parent's duty, according to her old-fashioned creed. Whereas Mrs. Verney seemed almost glad that Sir Roland Scrope— She paused, startled, scenting a fresh mystery: the reason for that broken engagement.

"If only she'd confide in me! I know I could help her," she thought, as they passed under the railway bridge. "But Joceline's so reserved. Though she likes me—I can feel that. Perhaps"—she smiled—"she will now."

When she reached the hotel, a shock was in store.

There, in the lounge, was Mrs. Verney, her watchful eyes on the door. Mrs. Bickersteth felt absurdly guilty as the old lady rose to her feet and advanced, with a martyred expression.

"I suppose you haven't seen my daughter?" she asked plaintively. "I left her here, with a headache, and advised her to lie down, but she isn't in her room and they can't find her anywhere. So tiresome, the bridge fell through, as the fourth player sent an excuse. So I 'wouldn't wait for tea. Now"—she shrugged her frail shoulders—"I've fallen between two stools! I never drink the hotel tea. It tastes exactly like straw."

Mrs. Bickersteth had an inspiration.

"Then come and share mine," she suggested. "Do? I told my maid to have the kettle boiling at four."

Mrs. Verney seemed to revive.

"That's very kind. I should enjoy it. Shall I come up now or later?"

"Now," said Mrs. Bickersteth firmly.

When they reached her room, she managed to intercept Piper and whisper instructions. Piper looked grave. Mrs. Verney was placed in a chair turned from the windows. For the young people, unsuspecting, might wander out on the terrace.

"Such a glare to-day," the hostess explained, pleased with her diplomacy. "Piper will soon have tea ready."

The latter had departed to fetch an extra cup and saucer. Mrs. Verney, accepting the only cushion, leaned back and became gracious.

"So nice to have a maid. I gave mine up during the war—a war economy, in fact. With death duties and

taxation, I couldn't afford the luxury. I had to think of Joceline's future. Yours seems such a good soul."

"She was nurse to my children when they were young and I simply couldn't part with her. So now she looks after me."

"A comfort?" The old lady smiled and nodded.

She had the great, social gift of adapting herself to her company. They drifted into house-management and other kindred subjects. Presently, under the magnetism of her guest's facile charm, Mrs. Bickersteth found herself embarked on the history of Elsie's rebellion.

Mrs. Verney was more than sympathetic. She went a trifle too far in her rigorous indictment of the present generation. Mrs. Bickersteth, a true Briton, found herself unexpectedly upholding the side attacked! Her visitor, enjoying her tea, listened and hid her amusement.

"Of course you're the best judge, but I've been through the same trouble. With Joceline and an attempt at warwork. I knew it would be too much for her, after her severe breakdown, but only experience teaches the young. She came home ill, at the end of a month, glad to be nursed by her old mother." A clock outside struck five and Mrs. Verney's face hardened. "I can't imagine where she is. I only hope"—she hesitated, then finished the broken sentence—"that she's not out with that Mr. Trench."

"But would it matter?" Mrs. Bickersteth saw her chance. "He seems such a nice fellow. I've taken quite a fancy to him."

"So I've observed." Mrs. Verney smiled. "I thought it so kind of you."

There was no mistaking her intention, nor the faint curl of her nostrils.

Mrs. Bickersteth's head went up.

"But he has been kind too," she remarked, very much the mistress of Torlish Manor. "Attentive and considerate. I like to find respect in young people and I think one has a certain duty towards one's countrymen abroad. He has a charming character." She paused. Mrs. Verney had laid a hand, with a winning gesture, on her knee.

"My dear," she murmured, "I quite understand. I, too, hate snobbishness. But would you ask him to Torlish Manor if your girls were at home?"

Mrs. Bickersteth looked troubled. It had been a shrewd thrust.

"I think so. Why not? You mean, with Elsie?" She frowned for a moment. "Yes, I would. He's a young man I could trust."

A short silence ensued. Mrs. Verney was considering a fresh move in the game, as she nibbled a *petit-beurre* with precaution.

"False teeth," thought Mrs. Bickersteth, who was proud of those Time had spared her.

Mrs. Verney, at length, looked up and met the other's honest eyes.

"You are differently placed," she suggested. "My poor Joceline lost her father at the time when she most needed him. A man has a finer sense of proportion. As it was, she allowed her trouble to prey upon her until it affected her health. I think I will tell you the whole story. I feel that it will go no further and it would be a relief to my mind. I'm very worried about my child."

There was genuine feeling in her voice, and Mrs. Bickersteth was touched by the unexpected confidence.

"Please tell me, if you care to. I've noticed that she looks pale and too serious for her age. But I put it down to Sir Roland's death."

"No." Mrs. Verney shook her head. "The trouble was earlier. When he broke off the engagement."

Her listener was startled.

"He broke it off?"

"Yes. After two years. A bitter blow to Joceline's pride. Of course this part was kept a secret. I believe"— Mrs. Verney smiled faintly—"that a good many people thought it was her own act, after her father's death, that she did not want to leave me alone. But the truth was that he tired of her. My poor daughter—" Her eyes filled. "For that was not the only affair. Later, after her long illness, she met a much older man who seemed deeply in love with her. A man she had known as a child. There was an understanding between them. He had to return for a year to Uganda, where he held an appointment. They parted, practically engaged, although it was not to be announced. I've never seen Joceline happier! Then he wrote—I read the letter—and told her that he had changed his mind. He made the excuse a reduced income, but this seemed absurd to me. Joceline, on her marriage, would have come in for a thousand a year, under her father's will, and she had told Howard this. No, it was the old story. My daughter attracts, but she cannot hold. Over and over again I've seen it—the spark, and the flame that has burnt itself out." She hunted for a handkerchief and pressed it gently to her eyes.

"But why? I can't understand it." Mrs. Bickersteth was horrified. "It's dreadful! And she's so sweet and pretty—unselfish too. Though I've noticed this doesn't appeal to young men. Until they're married; then they expect it." With an effort she collected her thoughts. "Perhaps they were the wrong men?"

Mrs. Verney's sense of humour was stirred.

"All of them?" She put the wisp of lawn and tulle carefully into her bead bag. "I'm afraid not. The secret lies in my daughter's nature. She loves with the heart and the head, but she has not a particle of what the French call 'tempérament.' I have slowly come to the conclusion that marriage would be a cruel mistake. She would not survive the disillusion. She is too"—she hesitated—"fastidious. Men find this out in time. They are chilled and like the knight in the story"—her voice fell—"they ride away."

"But you hardly expect a young girl," Mrs. Bickersteth began, "to be—" She stuck. She had always disliked the use of the word "passionate."

"No." Mrs. Verney nodded her head. "But that is what leads to marriage."

The motherly woman was unconvinced. The argument threatened her idol, Romance. She saw too the flaw in it. For it was the men who backed out, the girl who was willing, but sacrificed. Besides, nowadays, she thought, girls knew "everything." Something deep down in her, both primitive and kindly, had warned her from the start that Joceline's faint bitterness arose from thwarted instincts; a lack of love, not a fear of it. She stared out at the sky, tinged by the first pale rose of sunset. The placid lake

reflected the colour; even the hills seemed to glow. This beautiful world, she thought, calling to youth and planned by God as a garden for man's delight—for the greatest joy of all. She felt an odd touch of mistrust as the elegant old figure beside her moved her chair and followed her companion's gaze.

"This was some years ago." Mrs. Verney took up the thread of her story. "Since then I've watched over my daughter. I have even changed our manner of life. As soon as the War ended, I bought a small Villa at Mentone where we could entertain our friends, safe from the mixed crowd one finds nowadays in the hotels. Joceline has a varied life and I try to fill it with interests. Here, of course," she amended, "I have to devote myself to the cure. But in Norfolk she has many friends and she seems to have quite settled down, though there is little entertaining and, since the War, a dearth of young men. It is better so. I believe that Joceline was never destined to marry." Her voice strengthened. "That is why I do not encourage the attentions of that rather obtuse young man with a farm in California. Can you wonder?" Her dark eyes searched Mrs. Bickersteth's troubled face.

"No. Still—you will forgive me? What will she do when you are gone?"

"She will have pleasant neighbours, a beautiful home and enough money to live"—she smiled—"as I have lived. She is happy now, in her quiet fashion, healthy, except for occasional nerves, and absorbed in our country pursuits. And how many people are happy when married?"

This was difficult to answer.

"But if she really fell in love?"

Mrs. Bickersteth became aware that the other's movement now gave her an undisturbed view of the garden. Mrs. Verney's eyes were searching it.

"I pray to God every night that she may be spared such a disaster." There was a poignant note in her voice. "Her nerves would give way utterly under any prolonged strain and she is afraid—afraid of— Ah!" She leaned forward. Into the face that had been so gentle and despairing leaped a sudden fierce anger.

Mrs. Bickersteth followed her glance.

Through the lower gate two figures had passed. As they came nearer, she could see Trench talking to Joceline. The rosy light of the sunset seemed to have warmed her pale cheeks. She looked both young and vivid. In her hand was a ragged bunch of flowers, the spotted orchids of the woods, with deep-blue water forget-me-nots and the wild yellow pansy, limp as though long since gathered.

When they came to the steps, Joceline paused, laughing, and shrugged her shoulders. The gesture said: "Another climb!" Immediately the young man's hand slipped under her elbow, to remain there until they stood on the terrace.

Mrs. Verney rose from her chair.

"Excuse me," she said. "I must tell Joceline that I'm here."

With remarkable agility she stepped down onto the balcony. Mrs. Bickersteth, anxious, followed.

"Joceline!"

Mrs. Verney's voice reached the girl, as she paused, smoothing back a lock of hair that had escaped from

under her hat. Startled, she looked up. The happy light died out of her face, to be replaced by the shadow of fear.

"Mother! You back?" She sounded breathless.

Mrs. Bickersteth tried to reduce the affair to its normal proportions.

"Your mother's been having tea with me. If you'd like a cup we can easily make one? For both of you," she added bravely.

Trench answered for his companion:

"Thanks, but we've just had ours, at Guyot's. That's why we're late. The terrace was crowded."

He had raised his hat to Mrs. Verney. Now, bare-headed, he remained doggedly by the girl's side.

Joceline still stared up at her mother.

"We've been in the woods," she explained. "I thought a long walk would do me good. And it has. I've quite lost my headache."

Trench smiled at his secret thoughts. Mrs. Bickersteth nodded and smiled back. She knew on which side she would fight. That strange story about the girl? Somehow, it didn't ring true. Still, men, during the War, had been "chancy"—to use Piper's pet expression. No wonder, spoilt by all the women! And quite right too, she added quickly, remembering the hell of the trenches. But this man had won through and emerged finer for the ordeal. He would never "ride away." His voice roused her from speculation.

"I hope it's not inconvenienced you?" he said calmly to Mrs. Verney.

She ignored him.

"I want you, Joceline."

"I'm coming." Her lips closed on the word with a suggestion of defiance.

Mrs. Verney prepared to withdraw. This time she seemed to require assistance.

"Thank you." Her hand dropped from the other's arm. "I've so enjoyed my tea and talk. We shall meet you to-night. By the way, if you ever feel inclined for bridge, just tell me and I'll arrange a table. You have only to let me know at dinner."

With this remark, she reached the door, opened it—and there was Piper!

She drew aside respectfully and Mrs. Verney passed out. Piper, her face rather grim, watched her progress down the passage: an old but nimble figure, suggesting indomitable purpose.

"Piper?"

"Yes'm." She stepped inside and closed the door carefully. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I was watching, but they came in the lower way."

"It couldn't be helped." Mrs. Bickersteth sighed. "I think I'll get into my dressing-gown and lie down. I'm tired."

"You would be, ma'am." Piper was turning down the bed.

Her mistress paused, between two hooks.

"Now, what do you mean by that?"

"Well, she is tiring," Piper insisted. "I'm sorry for the poor young lady. Now, ma'am." She held the dress on the ground. Mrs. Bickersteth stepped out of it, one hand on the bony shoulder and yawned. "I'll just undo your

suspenders." Piper, her lips compressed, tugged. "You didn't ought to wear them so tight."

"It keeps me down," said the sufferer. "Dear me, I sometimes think, Piper, it will be nice to be really old. Though I shan't dress up like Mrs. Verney."

Piper gave a little snort.

"You'll always be respected, ma'am."

Mrs. Bickersteth nodded wisely.

At the other end of the corridor, in the wide, sunny room, Joceline, on her knees, was taking off her mother's shoes in a silence which could be felt. Suddenly the old lady bent and picked a twig from her daughter's skirt, then a little tuft of moss. She held them on the palm of her hand. Joceline, aware of the movement, looked up, to meet the scorn in the shrewd, dark eyes, the brows arched superciliously. Suddenly she revolted.

"Yes. I've been lying on the grass. Like a common gipsy! But I enjoyed it—though it isn't 'suitable to my age.' I know all that. Still you ought to be pleased. I've found a cure for my 'nerves.' I've had a wonderful holiday, nearly a whole— *Mother!*" She sprang to her feet, arms outstretched, to support the swaying body.

Mrs. Verney's eyes were closed, one hand pressed to her heart.

"The cachets," she breathed.

Joceline found them, poured water in a glass and guided it to the trembling lips.

"You'll be better soon." Her voice shook. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it, mother."

Mrs. Verney leaned heavily against the young shoulder,

her face turned from the one above it, far paler than her own.

"Help me to bed," she whispered. "The pain's a little easier now."

At last, with her daughter's assistance, she was lying between the sheets.

"Hadn't I better send for the doctor?" Joceline urged. "Do let me, mother?"

"No, the attack is over. He couldn't do anything more for me. If I get some sleep, I shall be all right. But don't leave me?" Her voice was piteous.

"Never." The girl stroked her hand. "I'll sit here, close beside you. Are your pillows quite comfortable?" She moved one dexterously.

For half an hour Mrs. Verney dozed. Dusk crept into the room and into the watcher's heart. It was all very well for Oliver to preach independence for the young, but the old had a claim as well. Those pitiful, last years when the flesh seemed the master of the spirit, subduing it and calling for help as the worn organs ceased working.

Suddenly Mrs. Verney stirred.

"I'm better. You can order dinner—for both of us—up here. I shouldn't mind a hot water bottle. My feet are rather chilly." She added with a twist of her lips, "I'm sorry to spoil your 'holiday."

Joceline's punishment had begun.

CHAPTER V

THEN the Verneys did not appear at dinner, Mrs. Bickersteth felt anxious. She discussed their absence with her neighbour.

"I don't suppose we shall see them to-night," Trench said rather grimly.

"Then let's have a little change?" The kindly lady was sorry for him. "We'll go down to the other hotel for our coffee. Would you care for that?"

"Sure." He welcomed the distraction.

"Perhaps there will be dancing to-night. Do you dance?" She was making plans ahead for the young couple.

"I love it! Will you promise me the first tango?" he asked with a twinkle in his eye.

"Silly boy!" But she was pleased. "I think I could walk there. It's all downhill."

"Oh, we'd better drive," he decided, but Mrs. Bickersteth was brave. She had shirked her exercise.

When the meal was over, they made their way to the road that fringed the lake. Trench offered her his arm, and she leaned on it comfortably, talking in her drifting fashion of her life in Devonshire.

The young man's thoughts wandered. He mistrusted Mrs. Verney profoundly. She was quite capable, he thought, of locking the girl in her room. This afternoon's

episode would mean open warfare. Well, he preferred it. He would fight to the death.

He came to himself with a start, aware that his companion was waiting for his response to one of her direct questions.

"Where I lived before? In—in the Midlands." He chuckled, and she glanced at him, divining some secret jest.

"What is it?" she asked indulgently.

"I was thinking of Mrs. Verney. She asked me what my 'county' was and I told her I was born in Derby. 'Oh, in the *Midlands*,' she said—like that! As though it put me outside the pale."

Mrs. Bickersteth looked embarrassed. What a snob the old lady was!

"I know Derby," she said brightly. "Such lovely country round about. The Peak—I stayed one summer at Matlock and my husband took the waters." Her hand tightened on his arm. "Let's stop a minute. I want a rest."

They had come to the meeting of the roads, where the stream was submerged in the lake, and they halted, watching the flow of the water. Trench took a sudden decision.

"Mrs. Verney doesn't like me," he informed his breathless companion, "or approve of my friendship with her daughter. I'm not in her set, you see. Thank God for that, if they're like herself!" His head went up, on his strong young shoulders. "For what does she do in life? She's eaten up with her own importance, yet she's nothing to her. An old doll, with an iron will, who makes a slave of her daughter. And it's worse than that," he added darkly.

"Come, come!" Mrs. Bickersteth soothed him. "I hope you're exaggerating. Mrs. Verney may have her faults, but I'm sure she's devoted to Joceline."

"Then she shows it in a strange fashion. Do you know what I think?" His face was stony. "That she's living on her daughter's strength. I've met old people like that before. They're"—he paused—"human vampires."

Mrs. Bickersteth was genuinely shocked.

"But that's only a legend. Or—or bats. The girl's anæmic and highly-strung. Her mother told me she suffered from nerves."

"Nerves!" he scoffed. "That's easily said. She's drained of vitality, nursing that selfish old woman. I've known a similar case—a cousin of mine who lived with a tyrannical father; was giving, giving all the time, because she had a lovely nature. And she died," he added tersely.

Unconsciously he moved on, Mrs. Bickersteth beside him. They turned up the dark Allée de Dante, the milky stream on their right, through the grounds of the Establishment. Mrs. Bickersteth was silent, thinking. Could this be what Piper had hinted when she called Mrs. Verney "tiring"? The old nurse had a fund of wisdom where young people were concerned. That massage too? Yes, it was wrong. The girl led an unnatural life.

"I hope you're not right," she said at last. "Of course I've noticed she does look ill and, somehow, old beyond her years. But then I gather she's seen much trouble. Her father's death and—" She broke off, confused. Whereabout in that strange story had the old lady spoken

"in confidence"? Surely the warning had come later, in connection with the second lover?

Her eyes were raised from the ground and she stumbled. Immediately she felt Trench's hand slip through her arm.

"Take care of these loose stones," he cautioned.

She was touched. Yes, he ought to know. It would only appeal to his chivalry. Impulsively she poured out the history of the broken engagement, adding, with the little sniff that always proclaimed her scepticism or an affront to her pride:

"Mrs. Verney thinks the fault is the girl's—that she hasn't the power to hold men's devotion."

"She'd hold mine." His voice was husky.

Mrs. Bickersteth felt thrilled. He was going to confide in her! Purposely she slackened her steps.

"Ah, you're fond of her? I guessed as much."

Trench nodded, staring ahead, and a little silence fell between them. The motherly woman, too wise to break it, waited, knowing the ways of youth. At last Trench glanced sideways and met the sympathy in her eyes.

"Ever since I first saw her. On the boat." He spoke jerkily. "I don't mind your knowing. To watch her, so —so attractive and wrapped up in the old lady's comfort. Never thinking of herself and looking so fragile too. So I got into the same carriage, wondering if I could help, and hoping—hoping they'd talk to me. But they—didn't. Still, I heard them speaking of Bagnoles and this hotel, and I managed to read one of the labels. On the rugs—I lifted them down. So when I got to Paris—" He paused. "Well, to cut a long story short, I'd meant to stay

there, then go to Brussels, work my way through Holland and take a Dutch boat home. Instead of which I followed them here. I thought, somehow, in a quiet hotel, we might get together. I hadn't exactly realized—" He stopped again. "Well, there it is! I don't suppose I stand a chance. But I'm going on." His face was set.

Mrs. Bickersteth wondered, the scene in the wood fresh in her mind. Why this note of despair? Perhaps the girl had checked his advances, aware of her mother's attitude?

"I'll help you all I can," she told him. "But I don't see why you should worry. Joceline is of age. She can marry whom she likes."

He caught her up:

"I'm not so sure! There's some mystery. Her mother has a hold on her. Though what it is beats me entirely. But I mustn't get her into trouble. She can't stand much more."

"No, be careful." She was thinking of the future. "Above all, Oliver, don't quarrel with Mrs. Verney."

Trench laughed.

"It isn't likely! She'd consider it utterly beneath her."

They were approaching the hotel. Mrs. Bickersteth said hastily:

"Of course you understand, my dear, that what I said just now, about Joceline and Sir Roland, was quite in confidence?"

"You can trust me," he answered simply. "'Roland'? That's odd. A Roland for an Oliver?" Mrs. Bickersteth looked puzzled. "You know the story?"

"Not exactly."

"They were rivals under Charlemagne and what Roland did, Oliver did. Well, it won't be true in my case. I mean I shan't be driven away." He saw her eyebrows contract and answered the look. "Yes, I'll give him his due. Mrs. Verney was in it—up to the hilt! He never left Joceline of his own accord. That I'll swear!"

"And the other man too?" She was amazed. This had never occurred to her.

"What other man?" he asked swiftly, and saw his companion bite her lip.

"Oh, I oughtn't to have let that slip! It was told me in confidence. How dreadful! You'll never repeat it? Promise me?"

"On my honour." They had come to a halt. "But I think now you ought to explain. It isn't fair—to Joceline."

"I don't know. I must think." She stood there, convicted of treachery, vainly searching her own conscience. If the mother had been influenced by a desire to protect her daughter, would it not be worse for the latter if this young man thought her light—a girl who had had many adventures? The doubt might tarnish his respect. Mrs. Bickersteth sighed. She had said both too much and too little. She looked up into his grave face. "I believe you're right. I'll tell you. Though I blame myself for speaking at all."

Trench listened, piecing together the threads of the disjointed story.

"Well, now you know everything," she concluded. "What do you think of it?"

"I'll tell you to-morrow." Under his tan, his face had paled. "I'm not sure."

Mrs. Bickersteth understood. He was suffering from the primitive desire that lies in all virile men to find the woman of his heart plastic, yet uninfluenced by association with his sex. She had wandered down the path of love with other men—was pure but awakened. Yet her mother refuted this? He straightened his broad shoulders and deliberately evaded the issue.

"What about your coffee?" he asked.

They walked on into the light pouring from the lower windows, and mounted the steps of the hotel.

The wide lounge was full to-night, not a seat in the veranda. Mrs. Bickersteth looked round at the gaily-dressed crowd.

"Why," she exclaimed, "there are the Thrings!" and moved forward impulsively.

A couple rose from their chairs and greeted her with effusion. Trench, in her wake, saw a tall, gracefully built man, his black hair sprinkled with grey, a note of care in his dress, with liquid, melancholy eyes and an air of power and assurance.

"Clever," he thought, interested, and turned his attention to the lady, who barely reached her husband's shoulder.

Fragile, exquisitely clad, she held in her fair, wistful face, with its pointed chin and wide grey eyes, the veiled expression of discontent that marks the chronic invalid.

Mrs. Bickersteth, her first excitement abating, introduced her cavalier:

"I was tired of my hotel and Mr. Trench took pity on

me and brought me down here for coffee." She added, for his benefit, "Lady Thring—Sir Raphael Thring. Now, isn't this nice?" She subsided into the latter's place whilst Trench captured two other chairs and they formed a circle round the table. "When did you arrive, Teresa? I had no idea you were here. Are you taking the cure?"

"I've just begun it. We only reached Bagnoles on Friday"—Lady Thring glanced sideways at her husband—"and Raphael is tired of it already!"

"Hardly that." He smiled back. "But I hoped to find some one here to walk with. I must have exercise. And there seem to be few English people. The French will do anything but walk, and I prefer a companion."

"Well, here you are!" Mrs. Bickersteth waved her hand gaily to the fourth member of the party. "He isn't one of the halt and maimed, though he pretends to drink the waters."

"Something to do," Trench confessed.

"Ah, you're in the same plight?" Sir Raphael had been observing him. He liked the man's athletic build and the candour of his bronzed face. "Well, if you're willing, we might explore the country. I hear there are some delightful old châteaux within easy walking distance."

"Let me warn you," his wife interposed, smiling at Trench, "that this may mean anything up to twenty miles. Don't let him kill you!"

She turned to Mrs. Bickersteth, and the two women began to converse in a lower voice, filling the gap since their last meeting. The friendship dated from their girlhood and, even now, the first call paid by Mrs. Bickersteth when she stayed with Adela was invariably in Devonshire Place, where the Thrings lived, in a beautiful home full of pictures and works of art. Sir Raphael was a connoisseur with a famous collection. He had the deep love of beauty inherent in his mother's race, for she had belonged to a prominent Jewish family. Trench detected this strain in his blood and was conscious that the name was familiar, although he could not exactly place it. As they chatted easily together, a reference to the War touched a spring of memory. Of course! The well-known alienist who had done so much for the saddest victims among the toll of broken men in the trail of Armageddon. The young man's interest deepened and took on a note of respect.

Sir Raphael insisted on playing the host and joined his guests in a liqueur. He was raising the glass to his lips when he paused, gazing down the room, on which a little hush had fallen. All eyes were turned eagerly to scrutinize the approaching figure, that of a young woman with a superb composure, her slender form swathed in a cloak of ermine trimmed with monkey-fur. She paused and nonchalantly loosened the pliant folds. Her glance drifted over the crowd, as though calling for attention to her gown, now partly visible, of dead Egyptian pink, the drapery caught up by a clasp set with pale green scarabs.

Apparently satisfied, she moved on, chose a table, settled herself languidly, and beckoned to a waiter, letting the cloak slip from her shoulders.

"That's a mannequin," Sir Raphael decided. "A handsome girl." Into his eyes had sprung a keener look, speculative and admiring. "Now, how did you guess that?" Mrs. Bickersteth stared at him. "She comes from our hotel, and a Mrs. Verney there told me all about her. She's known as 'la grande fille de chez Pallôt,' and she's showing off their latest models. A new dress every day—it really is quite exciting! Although of course one couldn't wear them," she added rather wistfully.

"Why not?" Sir Raphael was amused. "I wouldn't mind betting that some man here will have to pay for that cloak."

The shrill hum of conversation had risen again from all sides, but the women's eyes still openly devoured the costume in question.

"The dress is very plain. No trimming at all," Mrs. Bickersteth, puzzled, observed. "It can't have cost much to make, yet I hear their prices are enormous."

"But look at the lines," said her host. "That drapery is the work of an artist."

"Then why not add it to my collection," Lady Thring insinuated, and smiled at her old school friend.

"I will, if you'll wear it?" Sir Raphael responded.

His wife sighed.

"I'm not strong enough to go out at night."

"There you are!" He threw out his hands with an impatient gesture.

Trench divined that the delicate, pampered woman was a malade imaginaire.

"Do you always choose Teresa's clothes?" Mrs. Bickersteth meant it as a joke.

To her surprise, Sir Raphael responded in the affirmative.

"I shouldn't like that," she thought with a vague sense of uneasiness. "Of course it's annoying when Richard ignores a new hat, and he *always* prefers my old dresses, but it doesn't seem natural for a man to interfere in women's affairs. I know she has everything she wants"—her eyes slipped to the rope of pearls that were worth a little fortune and which fell into Lady Thring's lap—"but it would distress me. I should feel"—she hesitated—"bought! What a pity there are no children."

She confided this everlasting sorrow of the pair to Trench as they drove home.

"All those beautiful things," she said, "and no one to leave them to! Sir Raphael is broken-hearted about it. Teresa goes from cure to cure and is always in the doctors' hands. But isn't it strange that the poor generally have a quiverful and yet the rich, who could afford it, are so often disappointed?"

"Too much money," Trench suggested. "They don't live a natural life. My idea is that, to be healthy, you must have daily work. Though of course he must have worked hard to attain his present position. It's puzzling, isn't it? Was she well off when she married?" he asked.

"Poor as a church mouse. Her people lived in Devonshire, not very far from mine. I've known Teresa all my life. She used to make her own dresses and was never fit to be seen! Nobody thought she would marry, and then a neighbour took her abroad and she met Mr. Thring—as he was then; he was given his title later—and he fell madly in love with her." She added, in her vague way, "He did a great deal for her people. It saved her father from selling the place."

"I see." Trench guessed the truth: the daughter sacrificed to fill the family exchequer. It explained the state of her health to him. There might have been bred affection for the rich man whose name she shared, but love on her side was missing. "I should hate to marry a woman with money." He had mentally inverted the case.

"But Joceline has a thousand a year."

"No?" Trench looked startled. "I didn't know it. I thought, from something she let slip, that she was—well, hard up."

"I expect she has only a dress allowance now, and you know what girls are!" Mrs. Bickersteth smiled benevolently. "It comes to her—the full income—on her marriage. So her mother explained."

"Then that's it!" The young man struck his knee with his fist. "I might have guessed it! The hidden motive. Why Mrs. Verney drives away one man after another. Don't you see?" His voice hardened. "It means less for herself. Not only money, but power. And power is Mrs. Verney's god."

Mrs. Bickersteth was shocked.

"But that would be dreadful! They're very well off—it's an old banking family. They've a beautiful home, near friends of mine, and a Villa at Mentone. And look at the way the old lady dresses?"

"Exactly." Trench smiled grimly. "You can—on an extra thousand a year! I don't believe that Miss Verney has even an allowance." He looked confused. "The fact is, I heard them talking in the garden. I was hunting for a tennis ball behind the bushes—they couldn't see me. Her mother doled out a few francs and told her it must

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'last,' and then Joceline refused to take it. It was too late to appear on the scene. I couldn't help spying on them."

"Of course not." Mrs. Bickersteth soothed him. "Dear me, this is very perplexing. I hope you're not right. Still, of course, the girl was not yet twenty-one when her father died and probably, he left it all in her mother's hands."

"She'd see to that!" Trench observed.

They had reached their hotel. He helped his companion down and a little argument ensued, but he insisted on paying the fare.

"Now, mind you sleep," she told him, as they parted at the lift. "It's no good meeting trouble half-way. I have a feeling things will come right." She smiled up into his gloomy face. "Good night, Oliver."

"Good night, and—thank you!" He gave her a glance full of affection that warmed her motherly heart.

She opened it, later, to Piper, who listened without interruption.

"It's true about the money, ma'am. Miss Verney hasn't a penny-piece. Lady Carnedin's maid told me. What's more she loses her thousand a year if she marries without her mother's consent."

"What?" Mrs. Bickersteth was staggered. She very nearly kicked Piper, who was drawing off her mistress' stockings, with the sudden start she gave. "You don't mean to say that was in the will? Oh, dear, that makes things worse. She doesn't like Mr. Trench as it is, or think him good enough."

"The other leg, ma'am," Piper commanded. "If you go on like this, you'll never sleep."

"But *listen!*" Mrs. Bickersteth frowned. "Are you sure? How could that maid know?"

"Well, ma'am"—Piper hesitated—"I shouldn't like to suggest anythink, but there's only a thin door between her room and Lady Carnedin's, and Mrs. Verney takes tea there."

Mrs. Bickersteth nodded. Her thoughts went off at a tangent. Biographies of her own class should be written by the servants. Somehow, they generally got at the truth! That will, now? Mr. Verney had not looked like a weak man, to be ruled by his wife. But of course the War had changed everything. He might have foreseen Sir Roland's fate and mistrusted fortune-hunters. Her instinct told her this was the line which Mrs. Verney herself had taken at a time when death ruled over the land.

Piper helped her mistress to bed and proceeded to light the nightlight—a French one, which she mistrusted and placed in the middle of the basin in case it should explode.

"Good night, ma'am." She went out on tiptoe.

Mrs. Bickersteth, wide-eyed, stared at the luminous patch thrown by the little flame on the ceiling. Her mind was busy. Could this be the "hold" on the girl which Oliver had divined? Was Joceline fond of money too? But in any case, as the only child, it would come to her on her mother's death. She had a queer sense that this was not all. There was something further, a weapon Mrs. Verney hid. Still, Trench must be told to-morrow of the new factor in the case. A comfortable conviction seized her that the young man would be relieved. He was not after Joceline's money. Her eyelids closed happily. Her

last thought before sleep claimed her was that this explained the hitch in the love affair.

"I know he proposed," she told her pillow, "in the wood this afternoon. But Joceline asked for time. She didn't like to tell him outright. I must try and—" She slipped into dreamland.

Trench stood on the empty terrace in the clear morning light. He had not been so fortunate as Mrs. Bickersteth, but his bath had freshened him. A crisp feeling was in the air, and he walked up and down, watching the door. Would she come, the lady of his vigil? Mrs. Verney had long since left, in the omnibus, unattended. Where was Joceline?

In the night he had solved the problem. Money—that was the root of the evil. He knew that Mrs. Verney loved it. The very way she had counted over the small notes in her hand on that occasion in the garden had enlightened him. A wave of pity flooded his heart as he thought of the girl, penniless, in the power of that sleek old tyrant, her father dead, no brother to help her, her would-be lovers refused the house.

Why could she not break away and work, like many another modern girl? He realized that, in her class, the necessary education had been denied her from her birth. She had not even the means for a training. No, she was helpless, fast in the cage of caste tradition and prejudice. She "belonged" to her mother—slavery! He ground his strong teeth together.

The lounge door opened. He sprang forward.

"At last!" He looked at her searchingly and his joy faded, for she was bareheaded.

"I can't come." She sounded breathless. "But I saw you from the window, waiting, so I slipped down to explain. I have to write some letters for mother—important ones—to our steward. You understand, don't you?"

"Not altogether. Why shouldn't they wait? There's no post out before twelve." Unconsciously his voice blamed her, for he felt a change in her manner.

"I can't help it." In her eyes was the old baffling, empty look. "I must think of my mother first. She had a heart attack last night. I have to be careful not to upset her." With that, she made a movement to leave him.

Trench was wounded.

"I understand."

She turned in the doorway and looked back, caught by the bitterness of his tone.

"You don't!" she said desperately. "If you did—" She had gone; the door swung to."

He stood there, staring after her, his heart pounding against his ribs. For in the sapphire eyes he had seen, for the first time, a swift flame that swept away all his doubts.

She cared, then? He could have shouted aloud in that moment of exultation. Mrs. Verney might lock her in her room, but love would win in the end. He would carry Joceline back with him to the free life of California. It only needed time and patience.

And her mother had called her passionless? Trench

laughed under his breath, all his virile youth rejoicing. Then his face clouded. Those other men? With an effort he conquered his jealousy. The past did not belong to him. It was possible, too—his brow cleared—that she had not truly loved either, but welcomed a road of escape from home. There was something in her still face unsatisfied, as if she had sought vainly for happiness, which supported this theory. He turned and made his way down the steps, hearing voices in the lounge. He must be alone and think.

Leaving the tennis-court behind him, he became immersed in plans for the future. He was glad now that he had sold the row of cottages in Derby, which had come to him on his father's death. He was in funds for the moment, though part of this was already pledged to his partners in California. The necessity for a fresh sum of money to carry out long-needed improvements had been the main object of his journey back to the old country. What would they say to his marriage? He believed they would welcome it. There would be an end to their haphazard domestic ways. And Joceline would thrive in that perfect climate. There was room in the bungalow for them both. Later they could build their own.

Fancy finding her there to greet him after his long day's work; supper in the wide veranda, with the orange trees, starry with fruit against a sky of deep blue velvet—that dead-gold, patrician head and the movement of her soft, white hands?

He drew a deep breath of delight and became aware of a pungent, aromatic odour. Smoke was drifting through the air, the clean savour of a bonfire. He turned a corner, screened by bushes, and there it lay in a waste patch; a mound of leaves and green twigs, with a thin, grey column rising.

A "smother fire." The old name, familiar in his boy-hood, returned to him. Many a time had he played round a heap like this at the end of the road near the allotments, where his parents had lived, on the outskirts of Derby.

The leaves were only half dried by the sun and the sap in the little boughs prevented the fire from gaining ground, but within was the slow, sure consumption. It would smoulder like this for hours under its green smother, if no help came to it.

Trench looked round and saw a stake lying by a row of pots. He picked it up, paused for a moment to gauge the direction of the wind, and parted the heap on that side.

The glowing heart was exposed. In rushed the breeze. With a sudden roar the flame leaped up, licking tongues of yellow and red, to take the place of the ghostly smoke. Now it blazed, free, rejoicing.

Trench stepped back from the heat and smiled, at first boyishly, then with a maturer thought. It was an allegory. Had he not caught a glimpse that morning of unknown depths in the girl he loved? Of that "smother fire," so deceptive, choked down by tradition? It only needed the clean breeze of youth and freedom to fan the flame.

Again he plunged his stake in the mass and loosened the heavy burden of leaves.

CHAPTER VI

RENCH lay in the cool bracken, staring up at the Tour de Bonvouloir.

The sun had dipped below the hills and the sky was a clear duck's-egg green. Against it, the lonely tower with its weather-beaten stone looked like a black-ened thumb, a slender finger raised above it capped with a metal thimble, where the *tourelle* rose from the pointed roof. There it stood, surviving the château built in the fifteenth century, with no avenue of approach, hemmed in by heath and fern, on the edge of the Forêt d'Andaine.

Its slates were as high as the tops of the trees. Loopholes looked to the four quarters, empty like the eyes of a statue. On one side, a pollard leaned, the new growth brushing the lintel above the rusty iron door. Grotesquely shorn of its upper boughs, gnarled and ancient, the crooked tree, in the evening shadows, resembled a dwarf guarding the ruin from intruders.

A tower for a long-lost princess, Trench dreamed as he gazed at it, imprisoned there by a cruel parent; a Joceline of mediæval days, waving her fragile hand from the dark opening, on the forest, in eternal adieu to her banished lover.

The air was filled with the woodland smell of mossy earth, and sharp, more insistent, that of wild mint cutting across the sweetness of crushed bracken. Absolute stillness reigned, and the tower seemed to refute Time, as

though, in a breath, it had passed away, leaving Trench on another plane, ruled alone by the emotions, eternal as the sky above. He sighed from the depths of his troubled heart, still young enough to feel restless before this vision of moribund peace.

For four days they had not spoken—that was the grievance in his heart. Joceline seemed as elusive, as distant as when they first had met. Even Mrs. Bickersteth, patiently manœuvring, could not bring the pair together. There were no more early walks. The girl was invisible, until her mother returned from her bath. In the evening they would play bridge, or Joceline watch the game, seated at Mrs. Verney's elbow. The old lady looked triumphant. What had she done to subdue her daughter? Only once had Trench caught a wistful glance in his direction during these endless hours—a glance hurriedly averted. Deliberately she avoided him.

Had it not been for Sir Raphael Thring, Trench would have found the days hard to fill, despite his store of dogged patience. They tramped for hours across country, the younger man thankful for exercise that sent him to bed dog-tired, the elder one unwearied and restless, pleased to find a healthy companion, apt to be distrait at times, but, on the whole, a good listener.

Beyond the desire to stretch their legs, they held few ideas in common: Sir Raphael, over-cultured, a worshipper of beauty never wholly satisfied, disillusioned, outwardly suave and inwardly cynical; Trench, young at heart, questioning life, with the modern love of utility, a little ashamed of being moved by the glory of a sunset, but argumentative when his companion attacked one of

his ideals. Sir Raphael, for instance, held no belief in man's immortal soul. Human impulses and acts were dictated by the brain that would perish with the death of the body. Only the former lifted man above the level of animal life. His long work among the insane had confirmed him in this theory. The slightest lesion or clot of blood, and where was this "soul" upheld by priests? Loosen the mechanism of Reason and a Saint became a murderer! Look at religious mania, for instance? Was that the influence of the soul or the brain diseased by unhealthy obsessions?

Trench shrank from the scientist's conclusions. They jarred with the younger man's view of life; his belief in free will as a test of human courage and endurance and the glimmer he caught, as of a lamp, shining behind daily acts, that only smuttiness could dim, the dirt of evil thoughts and deeds. He had a feeling that God looked on and approved "decent work"; was Himself the Master Craftsman.

Sir Raphael's deity was Beauty. According to him, a man worked to gain the means to buy Beauty, in the form which pleased him most, either sensual or intellectual, and afterwards—Trench sought for a word, buried deep in the bracken, and with the clean palate of youth chose deliberately: "gloated," conscious of its nasty flavour. He felt sorry for Lady Thring. He had seen Sir Raphael's liquid eyes drift over her with the same expression as when he priced an Old Master. Money again? Trench wondered. Did it always bring evil in its wake? Yet man should be paid for his labour; ambition was a goodly thing. Suddenly he saw light. It all depended on char-

acter. A man must be strong enough to stand the ultimate test of wealth.

He scrambled up, for a supple figure had emerged from the tower. Sir Raphael came, with his springing step, over the uneven ground.

"I got the key at the farm," he said, "and went up. It was hardly worth it. There's a little prison under the roof and an inscription—rather curious." He recited it, with his perfect accent:

"'Adieu, Tour dont les murs sombres Souvent m'abritèrent dans leurs ombres, Enfant.'

After that I opened the door leading to the tourelle. A circular staircase, very dark. I left it alone, as it didn't look too safe to me." He drew out his gold case and lighted a cigarette. "Have one?" Trench refused. "Well, I think you were wiser to stay here. It's more romantic from outside. I had a look at the Roman Camp, but they're all the same. The Roman mind was hopelessly stereotyped. It's strange though, how they always chose a site commanding a perfect view."

"Well, it had to take in all the country for purposes of defence," Trench remarked, as they fell into step, their faces turned to Juvigny.

"But what about the forest here? Cover for an enemy. Before the age of explosives it could have concealed a large army, impossible to dislodge. But of course"—his quick brain solved the enigma—"the trees have encroached on the plateau. It was probably a wood in those

days, or even non-existent. That's it!" He smiled, white teeth showing for a moment in his olive face. "Now, we shall have to step out to get you home in time to change. Lady Thring doesn't like being kept waiting for her dinner."

Trench nodded and lengthened his stride. The light was dying out of the sky before the advance of dusk. Somehow, the mystery of that slender tourelle had departed. It was no longer Joceline's tower. If only she had been with him, sitting in the green bracken, slimhands folded in her lap. He had accepted Lady Thring's invitation to dine with them and watch the dancing afterwards, in a moment of rebellion. It hurt his manhood to remain, waiting, for ever waiting, for a sign or word from the girl. To-night he would dance if the chance arose, forget her for a brief span.

He parted from his companion in front of the old curio shop that invites loiterers on the bridge, reached the hotel by the lower path and made his way to his room. A note lay on the dressing-table, written in a sloping hand. He opened it, and his face changed as he skimmed the contents:

DEAR OLIVER:

I think you'll be pleased to hear that I've persuaded Mrs. Verney to let me take Joceline to coffee to-night at the Thrings' hotel. I've said nothing about dancing, and she doesn't know you'll be there. So be careful how you slip out. Mrs. Verney is playing bridge at some Villa. Look out for us, as we mustn't stay late, but I thought you'd like a partner!

Yours sincerely,

ELIZABETH N. BICKERSTETH.

Trench gave a whoop of joy. What a brick she was! His depression dropped from him like a cloak. Now, where were those new silk socks? His thoughts were tumbling over. To dance with her—damn that bootlace! He tugged at the knot, then laughed aloud. One up on Mrs. Verney! He would like to see her with old Thring. Those two would be well-matched. He gathered up his sponge and towels, and paused, struck by some resemblance between the strangely dissimilar pair. A love of money? Not exactly. The power it brought, to possess and hold. As he went to his bath, it came to him that this was the hidden curse of wealth which gradually stifled generous impulse in a nature tainted by jealousy. To be absolute—forgetting God.

"I can understand an agnostic," he thought, "but an atheist beats the band! It seems such darned ingratitude!"

As he emerged from the bathroom, he encountered Mrs. Bickersteth and stopped to pour out his thanks.

"How ever did you wangle it?"

"It wasn't easy." She beamed at him. He looked so fresh and vigorous, with his damp, crisp hair and the strong young throat, bared above his dressing-gown. "I told her you were off on a long expedition and that I should be lonely at dinner, suggesting that Joceline should share my table. Then the coffee, as an 'afterthought,' and that we could pick up Mrs. Verney in our cab on the way home." Her eyes twinkled. "That did it! I've often noticed that people with extravagant tastes rejoice in small economies. She was gracious because of the lift! Now, don't you be late. I'm glad you're pleased."

"Pleased! If I didn't think you'd smack my face—" He looked at her wickedly.

"Behave yourself!" Mrs. Bickersteth laughed, and retreated through the door of her room, to catch Piper broadly grinning.

For Piper had become his friend ever since the day when he had begged her to sew a loose button on his coat, a transaction in a side passage, Trench talking in his happy way, Piper spinning out her task. He had never met her since without a cheery "Good morning!" and the old nurse was contemplating an inquiry into the state of his socks. She felt sure he "walked through them."

Lady Thring had no reason to regret her invitation that night. She was surprised by the young man's brilliance. Sir Raphael too. He watched Trench with the little spark of mockery that lay in the depths of his Jewish eyes beneath their chronic melancholy. He was always a perfect host and his instinct warned him that his guest had no desire to linger at table, when Trench resisted a dish of peaches.

"No fruit?" he observed suavely. "Then let us secure some seats for coffee. That is"—he consulted his wife with his habitual courtesy—"if you're quite ready, my dear."

"Quite."

She rose, and they made their way to where the band was already playing.

"This corner, I think. It faces the door." Sir Raphael was amused by his guest's eager acquiescence. "Expecting some girl," he thought. For people came from the Villas on dance nights.

When Mrs. Bickersteth sailed in and Trench stiffened in his chair, the onlooker was surprised.

Then he saw the girl at her side and his own interest quickened. For Joceline was looking lovely. She had caught from the elderly lady a touch of joyous expectation, with the sense of light and movement round her. There was a faint rose in her cheeks; her sapphire eyes, wide-open, drank in the gay scene; the groups gathered round the tables, animated, chattering French, and the couples already taking the floor. She moved to the rhythm of the music, graceful but self-assured.

"There are my friends," Mrs. Bickersteth told her composedly, "with Mr. Trench. So he dined here? I think you will like Lady Thring. I've known her since my girlhood. Come along, dear." For now Joceline was hanging back.

Trench, nervously watching her, had seen the girl start and the delicate colour warming her skin deepen, to recede and leave her white. This had not escaped his host's attention. So he had been correct, after all?

"That's a handsome girl," he said to Trench. "Is she staying at your hotel?"

"Yes—Miss Verney." Trench rose to his feet, pale himself under his tan.

She had come, but she hadn't expected to meet him. She might make some excuse and vanish.

But presently, to his relief, Mrs. Bickersteth had taken his seat and he found himself Joceline's partner, at his host's instigation.

"Now go and enjoy yourselves," Mrs. Bickersteth said

to them, her eyes twinkling. "You can only be young once!"

There was no way out of it. Joceline surrendered. In silence, they became involved in the swiftly-moving throng.

After a few turns, however, Trench paused near the door.

"It's hot in here. Let's go out?" His voice was jerky. "Do you mind? Shall you want a cloak?" he added.

"No, it's quite warm." Her eyes were averted.

They went down the steps into the night.

Avoiding the groups round the veranda, they turned to where, in the distance, a lake was glimmering white in the moonlight against the background of wooded heights, piled on the rocks, under a sky of lapis blue powdered with stars.

It seemed as if neither could break the silence, the hush that brooded over the water.

A little island in the centre was joined to each shore by a wooden bridge with a latched gate midway that marked the boundary of the grounds. When they reached this, Trench halted.

The girl's eyes were fixed on the lake and the curve of the dark bank. She could feel her companion's tension and instinctively her head went up. She braced herself for a fresh ordeal.

"Now"—Trench's voice was husky—"will you tell me what I have done to offend you?"

She turned, startled.

"You? Nothing."

"Then why have you"—he choked—"dropped me?"

"I haven't." She stirred restlessly, with a quick look towards the hotel. "I've been busy. That's all."

"Then will you come for a walk to-morrow?"

"I can't." She would not meet his eyes.

"You don't want to? Or is it because your mother does not approve of our friendship?"

"Partly." A shiver ran over her.

"You're catching cold." He unlatched the gate. "It will be more sheltered under the bank."

She hesitated, then passed through the opening. Trench gave her a swift glance, as he let the gate swing behind them. She wore the old, incurious look, a mask which he could not penetrate.

They reached the land. Before them rose a steep path leading into the woods. It was dark here, with glints of moonlight piercing the boughs above.

"Why should your mother come between us?" Trench spoke hardly. "You're not a child! You can choose your own friends. And you seemed happy, those first mornings." Bitterness crept into his tone. "I think, perhaps, it would have been kinder if you'd turned me down at the start."

She did not answer. His eyes stole sideways. Her head was bent, her gaze fixed on her little slippers which matched the delicate peach-coloured dress. Suddenly something fell on the satin covering her breast and glistened in a shaft of light from the parted trees overhead.

"Joceline!" He halted, aghast. "I've made you cry—what a brute I am!" She was hurrying forward, but he checked her, one hand on her bare arm. "Please?" His

voice was imploring. "If you only knew what I really feel! How I—"

"No, no!" She tried to stop him. "Don't say it! It's no good. You'd only be—" A sob choked her.

"Be what?"

"You'd go."

He just caught the last word.

"Never! Not if you cared. Do you care?"

She raised her head. He had never seen any one look so sad.

"It's no good," she repeated. "I daren't risk—"

His arms went round her.

"There'll be no risk when you're mine. I'm strong enough for both of us."

"Ah!" she sobbed, "I'm not. I'm—afraid!"

The next moment, she was crying noiselessly, her face pressed against his sleeve, her body trembling with the effort to regain her control.

In the little clearing to which they had climbed was one of the benches erected by a thoughtful Administration. He drew her, unresisting, to it.

The girl, dazed, became aware that he was wiping the tears from her face with his own handkerchief. The clumsy tenderness of his action broke down the last barrier between them.

"Oh, Oliver, I'm so unhappy!"

"You needn't be. I'll take care of you. No one shall hurt you"—his anger flared out—"no one! I'm here to prevent it." He drew her closer. "That is if you'll let me," and bending his head he kissed her.

For a moment he thought she was going to repulse him.

Then her salt lips clung to his; her body went lax in his arms. It was more than a girl's surrender. Beneath the smother, the fire leaped up. Trench, at last, trembling himself, released her, to look in her flushed face.

"Joceline—Joceline," he murmured, "how sweet you are! Oh, my dear . . ."

She drew back, at his broken voice. Realization poured in.

"I oughtn't to have let you!" she cried.

"Why not?" He smiled at her. "There's nothing wrong in our loving each other."

"But there is. You don't understand."

"Then tell me?"

She shook her head.

"You won't be allowed to marry me."

"Won't I!" He almost laughed. "We'll see about that.

I mean to take you back with me to California."

The sadness had returned to her face.

"I couldn't leave mother alone. My father"—she faltered—"trusted her to me."

"When?"

"Before he was killed—in a letter."

Trench thought rapidly.

"But you were engaged at the time. To Sir Roland Scrope. Mrs. Bickersteth told me." He saw her frown and went on strongly, "Your father expected you to marry."

"But it was broken off."

"Only afterwards." He held his ground.

"Yes, I'd forgotten that." She was staring across at the opposite trees. "It's such a long way back. It seems

now like another life. Poor Roland! I sometimes think that I treated him very badly. I was so young, you see. I didn't really understand how hard it was for him to wait."

Trench was utterly bewildered.

"Oh, he waited?"

"He had to. It was to have been a year's engagement, but after that, each time when he came home on leave, with everything ready, mother was ill."

Trench nearly whistled, in his surprise.

"You mean, he waited for the marriage?"

"Of course. He had even the licence ready. But I couldn't leave mother—she would have died! She was different then, so broken. So, at last, I had to choose between them."

"My God!" He had realized the truth: the girl's noble sacrifice. He could have killed Mrs. Verney, remembering her specious story.

At the muffled exclamation, she started and looked up into his face.

"You think it wasn't fair to Roland? But it seemed the only thing to do. That last time—the day before—I was trying on my wedding-dress and mother fainted. She had one heart attack after another. She begged me not to desert her."

A clock struck the hour, and her dreamy look of introspection gave place to alarm.

"We must go back! We shall be missed."

"All right," he said soothingly, and helped her to her feet. "But tell me as we go along how you want me to

act, dearest. I suggest that for the present we should keep our secret to ourselves?"

"We must," she breathed.

Trench smiled in the darkness. He was on the right path.

"And we'll have our early walks together and meet sometimes after dinner or when your mother goes out to bridge. I shall be very careful. Shall we tell Mrs. Bickersteth?"

"No. She's a dear, but— Oh, Oliver, it doesn't seem right. I oughtn't to let you. Only—"

He felt her hand tighten in his.

They had come to the last of the trees. Trench checked her.

"Then give me one more? It has to last me—until Walden!"

He took it—with a difference. This time she had herself in hand. He smiled at the feminine touch when she asked quickly:

"Do I look awful? I don't want people to guess I've been crying."

He studied her face in the moonlight.

"You look the loveliest thing ever! But I'll tell you what we'll do. Wait here!" He ran down to the lake, rinsed his handkerchief in the water and brought it back in a folded pad. "Now, just put this against your eyes. For a minute—it will freshen them up."

She obeyed him like a child.

"Is that better?" she queried at last.

"Fine!"

She smiled, under his loving glance.

"Powder-puff next!" She searched in her bag. "You hold the glass." She handed him the little mirror. "Lower, silly! I'm not your height." She laughed, with a soft ring in the sound that was music in her lover's ears. He watched her pass the puff over her face, wholly intent on her reflection. Glancing up, she noticed a change in his expression. "What is it? You don't approve of powder?"

"It wasn't that," he said, smiling. "I was thinking ahead—wondering how often I should watch you do that when we're married."

He saw fear dawn in her eyes.

"Don't look ahead. It's—unlucky!"

Trench checked the words that rose to his lips.

"No. Thank God, we have the present."

He saw the issue fairly now. It was his will against Mrs. Verney's. Yet, still, he sensed a mystery. Why was the girl so afraid of her mother? The habit of submission was strong, but she loved him—he was sure of that—and, deep in her heart, rebellion smouldered. Perhaps when she knew him better she would tell him the whole truth.

CHAPTER VII

RS. BICKERSTETH was aggrieved. She had fully expected to hear from Trench an account of all that had transpired during the lengthy interval between the young couple's disappearance from the lounge and their return.

They had come in very quietly and settled down to a last chat with the Thrings and herself, until the hour warned the latter it was time to call for Mrs. Verney. Yet Mrs. Bickersteth's instincts told her that "something had happened," as she studied the two faces. She felt a little annoyed with Sir Raphael for monopolizing Joceline, leaving Trench to Lady Thring's languid observations. Teresa had been dull that night.

"She should stir herself," thought her friend. "She's really a very poor hostess."

The next day she had questioned Trench and found the young man reticent. They had been for "a turn in the moonlight"—this was all she could glean from him. Affairs were moving too slowly for the lover of romance.

"I shan't beg for his confidence," she decided, her Roman nose in the air. "Though I must say it seems ungrateful. They must get on without me now!"

It seemed to her, silently watchful, that the breach between the pair had widened. Trench avoided both mother and daughter, save for a formal bow when he passed the pair at lunch. The old lady would smile to herself, with a slightly malicious glance levied at the young man's table. But Mrs. Bickersteth noticed a change, as the days passed on, in Joceline. It reminded her of the second blooms of the roses she loved at home. The girl was flowering under her eyes. There must be something going on!

It was true that occasionally, in the evenings, Trench and Joceline were missing, when Mrs. Verney was absorbed in a battle with the General. Always the girl would slip back alone. Trench later, would stroll up, draw a chair close to his elderly friend, and chat with her, on every subject under the sun save the one she inwardly craved! She was getting utterly disgusted. She had wasted her time. Could it be that Mrs. Verney had spoken the truth when she said men tired of her daughter?

Piper had no further news; she had pumped her fellow-maid dry. Lady Carnedin kept to her suite, though Mrs. Bickersteth had hoped to find in her a new source of gossip. The disappointment added to her loneliness. She was too shy to air her French with the foreign contingent and, after a few tentative efforts on the part of "the General" and others, they concluded that she belonged to the type familiarized by their novels—all front teeth and British phlegm! Yet, how she longed to chatter.

She watched too, with a sense of being cheated, Sir Raphael's monopoly of Trench. With a cynicism rare in her, she decided that it was a mistake to "pass on friends." They were stolen from you! It was true that Teresa still claimed her, but her conversation was limited to two topics: her health and "clothes."

"It's all very well," thought the injured lady, "if you have the 'slim silhouette'—scraggy, I call it, at my age—but I can't afford eccentricities. Besides, there's Elsie to provide for and this new idea of hers. I must make my dresses last."

Still, she spent a happy afternoon draping her "old black satin" on Piper, whose thin form was padded with towels; the folds caught together "carelessly" by a cabochon affair, made of green beetle wings from a cherished piece of embroidery which a cousin had brought home from India. She wore it to dinner with the Thrings, and Sir Raphael's eyes, which missed nothing, had twinkled, divining the source of the inspiration: the mannequin's Egyptian dress with its exquisite clasp of pale green scarabs. But she still clung to the jet comb, like a gate at the back of her massive head. Teresa, with a grain of mischief, had told her she was getting "quite French!"

"And how is your pretty young friend?" she asked. "Raphael saw her in the woods with Mr. Trench the other morning."

Mrs. Bickersteth hid her surprise and glanced at her host for confirmation.

"An early bird," he supplemented. "It couldn't have been nine o'clock. But he'd found his worm all right!"

This increased the good lady's grievance. Why couldn't Trench be honest? She was disappointed in the man. And Joceline, deceiving her mother like that—still waters run deep! Mrs. Bickersteth quite forgot that she had connived at their secrecy. She went to bed, weary of youth and awoke to fresh annoyance of an unexpected

kind. For Piper had "overslept" herself—this was her explanation, aggressive, because she felt guilty and was prepared for a dressing-down. But Mrs. Bickersteth forgave her, adding insult to injury; for Piper was strung-up for a scene and it seemed a very tame ending. She flapped about on her flat feet, bristling at every angle.

Mrs. Bickersteth was wounded. It would have been a relief to her temper to have given Piper a "good scolding," and all she got in return for her self-control was "a fit of the sulks!"

In a heavy silence, she dressed and went out into the garden—not because she wanted to go, but because the atmosphere was explosive. It was far too late for her bath and she wandered aimlessly, past the deserted tenniscourt, out of the reach of Piper's eyes. She was ostentatiously shaking furs on the balcony—to show that she forgot nothing—instead of going to her breakfast.

On went Mrs. Bickersteth, doggedly taking exercise. Before her was a clump of bushes, a beaten path winding round them. She had never explored this corner before. She sailed on, turned to the left, and halted with a sudden gasp. There, within a yard of her, was Joceline in her lover's arms!

"Oh!" Mrs. Bickersteth stepped back, hot and confused. "I'm sorry! I—"

The young people shot apart. For a moment the air was full of tension. Then Trench laughed. Mrs. Bickersteth's face was too much for his sense of humour. Her eyes were popping out of her head.

"Caught!" he said, and glanced at the girl. Joceline recovered her dignity.

"Please don't go." She moved closer and, rather shyly, held out her hand to the embarrassed intruder, her sapphire eyes full of entreaty. "Oliver has wanted to tell you."

She could not have said anything better. Mrs. Bickersteth's rancour fell away.

"But I guessed it!" She beamed on them. "That night at the dance. Yes, my dears. Well, I hope you'll both be *very* happy."

She drew Joceline to her and kissed her.

"And what about me?" Trench laughed.

Before Mrs. Bickersteth could prevent him, he slipped an arm round her solid waist and saluted her on the cheek.

"Well, I never!" She tried to reprove him and failed. "If you'd put that plank on those two big pots, I could sit down and hear everything. I really can't stand much longer."

They hastened to build her a throne.

"There's room for us all." Mrs. Bickersteth lowered herself gingerly. "Yes, it seems quite safe. Now, you sit on either side of me."

Joceline complied, but Trench, in a man's way, preferred to face the situation on his feet. He was fond of Mrs. Bickersteth, but he wondered if she could keep a secret. That story now, "in confidence?"

"You're the only one who knows," he began. "You see, we've not fixed things yet. I'm waiting for a cable to tell me how long I can be spared. And at present we think it wiser to say nothing to Mrs. Verney." His eyes sought Mrs. Bickersteth's.

She nodded her head.

"I understand."

"Mother is not very strong," said Joceline. "And if—if she didn't approve, she might fall ill in the midst of her cure. We both think it better to wait."

She glanced rather helplessly at her lover, who promptly shouldered the burden again.

"We didn't even tell you"—he smiled at her winningly—"because, when it does come out—well, it's no good pretending—there'll be a dust up! We didn't mean you to be in it. You'd been so kind already. You see?"

"But I'd rather. I want to help you, and I've had so much experience." She underlined the word, laying a hand on the girl's arm. "I noticed you seemed happier and I think perhaps, at present, you're wise." She sighed sentimentally. "Why shouldn't you have your golden hour?"

Joceline dared not look at Trench. His lips twitched, but he nodded gravely.

"You can count on me to keep your secret." Mrs. Bickersteth resumed, in her slow, pleasant voice. "I don't want to deceive your mother, but I understand young people. They generally confide in me. I think every girl should marry, although of course nowadays it's not so simple as it was—fewer men, and such strange ideas! All this work for women, for instance. So wrong, for young mothers." She pulled herself up, aware that she was encroaching on delicate ground. "But I always say that parents should look ahead and think of the days when they're gone. I encouraged my two girls to marry, and I hope Elsie will do the same."

"I should think your daughters have been happy?"

Joceline spoke impulsively. "Mother's—different. But then, of course, she's much older than you, and I'm the only one left to her." She glanced at her wrist-watch and rose to her feet. "I must fly! She'll be returning from her bath. You stay and talk to Oliver."

"Well, see her as far as the end of the bushes," Mrs. Bickersteth ordered the young man. "I'll wait here till you come back." She smiled, in her element. She was not altogether misled by Trench's tactful explanation. Lovers revelled in secrecy. It was quite natural. Still, they had told her first. "Dear children," she said to herself.

She had little compassion for Mrs. Verney—that supreme egoist. There would be a hard battle before them, and Joceline might lose her money.

Trench referred to this when he returned. He drew up the sack and squatted on it, facing his companion, who looked, with her spreading skirts and her sanguine countenance, like one of those weighted manikins which rock, but immediately find their balance. There was something immovable about her, British and reassuring, as though she had weathered many storms. Joceline had christened her: "The Dreadnought." She lay, watchful, in calm waters, but fully prepared to unmask her guns in defence of the younger generation.

"About Mrs. Verney," Trench resumed. "It's going to be a fight, you know, between her influence and mine. And she isn't scrupulous in her weapons. She told you a lie the other day about that affair with Scrope. I was quite right when I said that she was at the bottom of it." He gave his listener the true version and watched her in-

dignation grow. "She makes her health the excuse, but it's the money she's after! Of course it's difficult for me, as I can't say this to Joceline. She's loyal, on the main points, and I have to go jolly careful. I really think the best plan," he cried, with a touch of recklessness, "would be to run away with her!"

"Why not?" Mrs. Bickersteth sounded eager. What a romance? And the mother deserved it! "You could both travel with me to Paris when I leave here, and then—" She stopped, pensive. "If it comes to that, I'll give up the week with Richard—he was never really keen on it—and we'll go straight through to London. Adela would put me up, and Joceline too—it would make things quite proper—and you could be married at once and sail for California. Have your honeymoon on board! Yes, it wouldn't be rough at this season." She paused, for Trench was laughing. "You're an ungrateful young man!" But she smiled.

"I'm sure not. It was the pace you were setting. Seriously, though"—his face grew grave—"I don't know how to act. What I'd prefer is to have things out with Mrs. Verney. If she withholds her consent, then we'll get married without it. But Joceline's so afraid." A line showed between his eyebrows. "I can't quite fathom it. It's not the money. That I'll swear! She's content to be a poor man's wife. It's something else, and I don't like to press her. I wonder if you could get her to tell you?"

"I'll try." Mrs. Bickersteth's face changed and she held out her plump hands. "Help me up? I'm getting cramp!"

They parted at the foot of the steps. Mrs. Bickersteth

glanced at her balcony. Empty! She sighed. She was longing to pour it all out to Piper, who would never breathe a word of it. But in the old nurse's present mood, she might just as well talk to the wall for any response she would get. Mrs. Bickersteth felt both injured and puzzled. She had been so kind—said nothing, except: "Well, I'll forgive you, Piper. It isn't often you're late!"

But this was precisely Piper's grievance. She had had it all so well planned, by the time she had parted her grey hair and screwed it into the knob behind. Her mistress would speak sharply. Then she would say, with dignity: "I know how it happened, ma'am. I was working until late last night at the ladders you made in your new stockings, with the black so trying to my eyes. I hardly got a wink of sleep." And, injured: "It shan't occur again, ma'am."

Mrs. Bickersteth would look repentant and probably pat Piper's shoulder. Now, of course, she sailed about with one of her "angelic airs," putting Piper in the wrong! It wasn't fair. Not after all these years. Well, there was no moth in the furs and she would work until she dropped! But she wouldn't forget it in a hurry.

Mrs. Bickersteth could not divine this. She put it down to Piper's age and decided to be kinder than ever as she panted up the steps. She passed indoors and was just in time to see Mrs. Verney descend from the bus, assisted by Joceline. The old lady was in a good humour.

"Good morning!" She waved her hand. "You're back before me."

"I didn't go," Mrs. Bickersteth explained. "I'm afraid

I overslept myself." For she was loyal where she loved.

"That's gadding about at night," Mrs. Verney teased her gaily. "I shall have to tell your doctor! Would you care to have tea with us this afternoon?" She checked herself. "No, I'd forgotten! I'm driving with Lady Carnedin and we may be late. Better say to-morrow." She stepped into the lift, her burnous drawn around her, showing her dainty little feet.

Mrs. Bickersteth got in too, followed by Joceline.

"And what are you doing?" she asked the girl. "Will you come for a drive with me? I've only a one-horse shay, still it's very comfortable."

"Yes, take her," said Mrs. Verney. "The air will do her good. Though she's looking more herself lately. Don't you think so?" Her shrewd, black eyes lingered on her daughter's face. "You've quite a colour, darling."

"I ran up the steps to meet you."

"Oh, you were in the garden below?"

"With me," said Mrs. Bickersteth, smiling. "I don't often walk so early, but it was such a lovely morning. Now I must write my letters home." As she billowed along the passage, "I did that rather neatly," she thought.

Reaching her room, she found Piper rearranging the linen drawer. She stood up, straight as a grenadier.

"Busy?" Her mistress smiled, though her heart sank when she saw the thin line of Piper's mouth. "I have some exciting news. Mr. Trench and Miss Verney are engaged!"

"Yes'm?" Piper's face was blank. "Is there anything you require, ma'am?"

"No." Mrs. Bickersteth turned away.

Piper flapped out and closed the door with the minimum of noise. A moment later she tapped.

"Come in!" Her mistress felt hopeful.

"I was going to ask, ma'am, if you could spare me this afternoon? Lady Carnedin's maid is off duty"—this with bitter emphasis—"and she wants me to go for a walk. And not feeling over-well—" She paused.

Mrs. Bickersteth rose to the bait.

"Oh, Piper, you're not ill, are you?"

"No, ma'am, but I didn't sleep."

Out it came, the bottled-up explanation!

Five minutes later, Piper was sitting on the edge of a chair—to show her respect—listening to her mistress' story, her little red eyes alight with disgust at Mrs. Verney's behaviour.

"She's double," said Piper. "I always thought so. "I'm sorry for the poor young lady. We could make the cake, ma'am, at home. Cook's clever with the icing."

"So we could." Mrs. Bickersteth beamed.

It was dark on the terrace that night and the hotel guests did not linger after the usual promenade. Trench and his fellow-conspirator had it securely to themselves.

From the trees that fringed the Race-course came the melancholy sound of a solitary screech-owl. Mrs. Bicker-steth sighed, affected by the mystery of the warm silence and her non-success that afternoon. Joceline had been very sweet, yet her elderly friend had "got no further"—so she confessed to Trench.

"She's very dignified for her age. I didn't like to question her. But one thing's plain: she's devoted to you."

"I don't believe Mrs. Verney has anything really wrong with her. My mother died of angina, but from all Joceline tells me Mrs. Verney shows no symptoms of it. Her case seems baffling to the doctors. They don't admit any dangerous trouble. From all accounts, it's a gouty heart, or else a chronic weakness. No disease. If you ask me, I think she finds it pretty useful! I don't want to be hard, you know. But I don't trust Mrs. Verney any!"

"Nor I," Mrs. Bickersteth concurred. She added sagely, "Time will prove."

"But I can't afford to wait for Time." Trench frowned through the darkness. "I've got to get busy and settle matters. It's not fair on my partners. There's another thing that worries me too." He paused uncertainly.

"Tell me?" came to him in the comfortable voice.

Trench yielded to it.

"Well, I may be imagining, but it seems queer that Joceline, who speaks of Scrope quite frankly, never mentions that other man. You'd think, to hear her talk, that after her illness she settled down to be maid-companion to her mother and gave up all thought of marriage—that no one else ever wanted her! And she's so open, otherwise." He stirred restlessly in his chair. "For instance, about her money. She doesn't like that sacrifice, because she knows we could do with it, and it seems unjust—not at all what her father contemplated. He added this last codicil to his will before he went off on a tour round the Eastern Counties in connection with Remounts. He expected her to marry Scrope, but at that time we were paying a heavy price at the Front, and Mrs. Verney pointed out that if

Scrope were killed, there might be trouble. As it happened, a neighbour's daughter had made a most unfortunate match with an officer outside her class and in every way unsuitable. Mrs. Verney pointed out that the War was upsetting old traditions and she wanted to protect her daughter if anything happened to Mr. Verney. Unluckily, he gave in to her."

A little silence followed his speech. Mrs. Bickersteth was puzzled.

"There's that owl again," she murmured. "I wish it wouldn't. It makes me feel creepy."

"Damn the owl!" said Trench under his breath.

"I'm thinking, my dear." She patted his arm. "About Howard, it may be that Joceline is ashamed to tell you. You see, Mrs. Verney might have been right in *that* instance, and no girl likes to confess she's been thrown over. What was her illness?" She caught at the point.

"A nervous breakdown. I don't wonder! She'd chucked Scrope, for her mother's sake, on the top of her grief about her father, and then came Mrs. Verney's illness. It began with septic influenza, and Joceline nursed her through it. Then the old lady developed acute rheumatism and the doctor ordered her daily massage. Not easy to get in a country place when every nurse was wanted in the crowded hospitals. So they came up to London for two months. Mrs. Verney had treatment and Joceline took a course in massage. As usual, everything fell on her! When Mrs. Verney was over it, Joceline collapsed. She was very bad and it seems to me that this was the time when her mother got a hold on her"—he scowled—"and never let go!"

"Probably." Mrs. Bickersteth nodded. "I've heard of cases like that. With nurses who take advantage of the patients' dependence on themselves. If they're clever they sway the invalids' minds. Look at all the things you read in the papers about old men who leave their money to nurses or servants, ignoring their own families. That's influence, when the mind is weakened by perpetual suffering. Bad influence." She sniffed, and added in her vague way, "Mrs. Verney's very extravagant."

They seemed to be talking in a circle and arriving at no conclusion. Said Trench at last:

"Well, I promised Joceline a week and that's up in three days' time. Then I shall act. If Mrs. Verney withholds her consent, I shall make my plans and stick to them. She'll have to give me a good reason for my unsuitability. I can afford to keep a wife and offer her a good home in an idyllic climate. I mayn't be"—he smiled—"'County,' but my father was a gentleman and I've had a first-class education. I'm not going to be trodden upon, as if I were out for Joceline's money! I know the conditions of the will. And I mean to marry her."

"That's right. I'll help you too." Mrs. Bickersteth reverted in detail to the plan discussed with Piper.

Trench listened, touched but amused.

"I wish you were her mother," he said. "Would you have me as a son-in-law?"

"I would." She paused. "I've never told you, but you remind me, at times, of my dear boy who was killed."

Sorrow had crept into her voice. Trench's hand went out and covered hers.

"Hard luck. Your only son?"

She nodded.

"It made such a difference. All these years we've planned for him, kept up the place and looked forward to his living there when we'd gone. It's been rather a struggle too, with the girls' education and all the repairs and taxes." Suddenly she found herself asking the young man's advice about Elsie.

He gave it without hesitation.

"If you can manage it," he said, "I think she ought to have the chance. It shows grit, her wanting it, and, after all, it's her own life. She'll be happier with some occupation. Also, it seems to me that if she can make it pay it's the right solution in these times. I've never really understood the trouble about the landed gentry. If they're so hard-up, why don't they work?"

"Ah!" Mrs. Bickersteth snorted. "You've been reading some of these modern novels. Written from the outside"-she emphasized the word-"or perhaps by some woman who has stayed once in a good country house and has found herself neglected! I don't know why they should always attack us? It isn't fair. We do work. Look at my husband, for instance. He manages the whole of the place, is his own agent and always busy, from morning till night. And he's loved and respected for it. I'm sick of reading these present-day books of violent, drunken squires, who use the most profane language and live in idle luxury, with the roofs rotting off their farms! Their wives too, with 'chiselled features' and coats-ofarms on their hand-bags, who are always so rude to the poor!" She paused, gasping for breath. "What do these authors know of the facts? The endless economies, selfdenial and financial anxiety? The feeling that every stick and stone is sacred, to hand on to the children."

Trench looked dubious.

"But isn't it handing on a burden? Wouldn't they be better—free?"

"Do they want to be free?" she retorted. "Don't they love the place as much as we do? Look at the outcry that's raised when a farm is sold over the farmer's head the house where his grandparents have lived? Isn't it the same with us? It's as much home as the smallest cottage belonging to a labourer; it's filled with precious memories. But the old order's dying out under the burden of taxation. And I'll tell you one thing: the new landlord isn't liked in the countryside—those profiteers and rich tradesmen who are buying up old estates. They haven't had the proper training, like our sons. They may mean well, but they don't understand the tenantry. They ride rough-shod over old customs and force reforms down the cottager's throats. We may be shabby, but we belong, like the old oaks. You may say 'What's in a name?' and I'm not clever enough to explain it. Still it stands for something in this country—a sense of protection and charity. Though, of course, there are bad squiresthere are black sheep in every class—but why make them the rule and not the exception? It isn't just."

"No," Trench spoke thoughtfully. "If the sons like it, it's their job. But what about the daughters? I was thinking," he added, "of Lady Thring and of something you told me about her."

He heard Mrs. Bickersteth move in the darkness.

"Well, that was just a hard case. Besides, she wasn't forced to marry."

"Did she do it from personal ambition? For her own sake?"

"Certainly not." Mrs. Bickersteth sounded indignant. "Though she liked him."

"'Liking' isn't enough. Did she do it for her family?"
"Partly."

"Well, there you are! Was it worth the sacrifice?" Mrs. Bickersteth sighed and remained silent.

"In the early centuries," said Trench, "unwanted girls went into convents. Then came the Reformation, and the only thing open to them was marriage. I mean, of course, in your class. Later on they had a shot at being governesses or companions. But now they stand a better chance. They can work." His voice vibrated.

Mrs. Bickersteth leaped to the conclusion.

"So you think I ought to give in to Elsie?"

Back came the young man's answer:

"I do. She has a right to choose. The right denied to Joceline. *She* wanted to work and her mother took away her allowance—made escape impossible to a girl brought up as she had been. That's what Tradition's done for her!"

"You're very hard," mused the elderly lady. "But I've noticed that particularly in the present-day young people. The War has upset everything."

"Well, we've been through it," said Trench grimly. "It's been a young people's war."

CHAPTER VIII

N Sunday it rained; in the soft, continuous fashion that suggests the tears and laughter of Spring. Mrs. Bickersteth had a secret conviction that it ought not to rain abroad, where, at least, one expected a dry climate. At Piper's suggestion, she wore a shiny mackintosh. It made her look like a child's balloon!

She found Mrs. Verney, snugly hiding in her creamy burnous, in the usual corner of the hotel omnibus. Joceline stood under the porch and waved her hand to the pair as that vehicle lumbered off. The clouds hung low over the woods, and in the air was the sweet smell of the grateful soil and thirsty leaves, with a sense of rising sap, indescribably youthful, that stirred her blood. She wondered where she would find Trench. No walk to-day, but some quiet corner in which they could whisper, undisturbed.

As she turned back through the lounge, she heard the notes of a piano; then a man's voice, untrained, but mellow, in harmony with the early hour and the freshness of the garden. It issued from the little salon, a typical French retreat, with walnut chairs lining the walls and a forbidding sofa, an escritoire with massive ink-pot, thin and smudgy blotting-paper, some modern imitation bronzes and a notice: "It is forbidden to smoke."

Here, in the evenings, a few old ladies would collect and exchange reminiscences over knitting and embroidery, with windows and door tight-closed. At present the latter was ajar. Joceline peeped through the opening and smiled to see Trench, firmly camped on the music-stool, eyes fixed on his long hands as he wrestled with the accompaniment.

She stole in, bent over him and kissed the top of his head.

"You!" He swung round and caught her to him. "That's good!" He laughed at her. "Isn't it a top-hole day?"

"Yes." She understood his mood. "What are you singing? Do go on."

"I can't sing," he protested. "I can only make a noise."

"Well, make it, then. No, not again"—she stepped back, evading him—"not until you've sung to me!" and took up a listening position at the side of the piano, a slim arm resting on the top.

"All right. It's a song that suggests you. Us," he corrected and struck a chord.

"'I am building a House of Love,
With a door of oak and studded leather
Where no man may enter ever;
And there is a High Tower above,
With windows wide open to the sky
And the shift and shimmer of swallows' wings
That the Spring brings, the Spring brings—
So there I and my dear can lie.

We'll watch the tree-tops and, on high,
Ship after ship, the Clouds sail past
With golden pennon and rain-washed mast;
We'll laugh when the Wind blows the blossom by,

For nobody, nobody can look in And see us there, close together— No Old Woman, soured by the weather, To shake her head and call it Sin!'"

Joceline smiled, but her eyes were tender.

"I wonder if we shall get like that when we're old—impatient of youth and youth's follies?"

"Never! I shan't let you. We shall be lovers still and lock the door of our tower."

"Is there a tower in your house?"

"No, but we'll build one. Something like the Tour de Bonvouloir. I must take you there some day."

She nodded. She did not tell him that she knew it, had often driven past with her mother. Beneath his simplicity and strength, there was something child-like in her lover which appealed to her and called for her womanly protection. Such a man, yet such a boy! Aware of his ardent glance, she looked away, slightly troubled. The future seemed so insecure.

Her eyes fell on some sheets of music, stained by time, on the piano, and she gathered up the topmost fragment. She examined the cover, with its ornate inscription: Rhap-sodie, à Quatre Mains.

"Let's rhapsodize with four hands? You get a chair. What fun!"

"I'm not very good at reading," he warned her, but, rejoicing in her mood, obeyed. She seemed unusually happy to-day.

They settled themselves, propped up the worn sheets, and plodded on, to the final triumphant chord.

"Isn't it hideous?" Joceline laughed. "But the French have a passion for duets. It's part of the training of a jeune fille bien élevée! We used to do this at the Convent, on Sunday afternoons, when it rained and we couldn't get out."

"The Convent?" He was surprised. "You're not a Catholic?"

"Not a Roman Catholic," she corrected. "But I was educated in Paris. The convent there was mother's idea. She thought it a good thing for a girl to be sent out of England and to mix with other nations. Her own mother was French, you see. Besides"—her eyes twinkled—"I believe now it was an excuse for her flying visits abroad. My father hated crossing the Channel. He was wrapped up in our country life, very keen on hunting and shooting. But mother had no tastes that way, so she used to escape and come to me."

All this was news to the man.

"Partly French? I might have guessed it. She speaks the language so fluently. Did you like the Convent?" he asked her.

"I loved it! Of course not in every way—too many rules and restrictions. Still, looking back, those seem the happiest years of my life."

"Until now, I hope?" His face was wistful.

"Until now," she answered gravely.

"Come and tell me all about it. Do you think we dare try that sofa? It looks so—respectable! As if it would slap me if I kissed you."

"We'll risk it!" She laughed, and they sat down, Trench's arm round her shoulder.

He had the curious impression that this convent experience held the thread of one of his many problems concerning the girl's reticence. He led her on to talk of her schooldays and realized, for the first time, her deep interest in religion. Through the disjointed story one name cropped up persistently: that of a Mary Gringold who had been her chosen friend.

"She's become a nun," Joceline added. "I'm hoping to see her during the week we stay in Paris on our return."

Trench smiled, but let this pass.

"A nun? Sounds rather depressing to me. I mean, at any rate, in one's youth."

"Oh, but she wasn't!" Joceline looked up, her blue eyes full of dreams. "We had lovely times together. She was always happy and smiling, overflowing with energy! That last summer we spent at the Convent—I stayed there for the holidays—we used to have all sorts of fun. Her brother came over. She had no father, and Howard was sixteen years her senior, so he was allowed to take us about."

Trench had barely repressed a start, but he caught himself in hand again.

"That must have been fine." He steadied his voice. "I shouldn't think he approved of her taking the veil?" he suggested.

"Howard? No, he was disappointed. He wanted her to keep house for him. He was a Commissioner in Uganda." As though that name had been a signpost pointing the way to danger, she stiffened and went on quickly, "You mustn't think all nuns are sad. It's quite

the contrary. I've sometimes thought," she admitted, "of becoming one myself."

"But you'd have to change your religion?" He was startled in earnest. "You wouldn't do that?"

"Why not?" Into her face had stolen a new expression, wistful and luminous. "I don't think mother would mind. Her people were Roman Catholics—she reverted when she married my father—so I suppose it's in the blood. And sometimes, it seems to me that there's a force"—she hesitated—"a peace in the older Faith, which is wanting in ours. More certainty. Something to lean on when troubles can't be shared."

Now she was in the mood he desired, lulled from suspicion. Trench struck.

"Well, I always think that religion is every one's individual concern. But I can understand the brother being sore when he lost his sister. Do you ever see him now?" he asked.

"No, not since—" She pulled herself up. Again he saw the shadow of fear dim her spontaneity.

"Since what?" Ruthlessly, he pressed her. He meant to lay this ghost between them.

"Since he stayed with us in Norfolk."

His heart sank. She was not going to tell him.

She rose to her feet restlessly.

"I can't stand this sofa any longer! Let's have some more music? *I'll* play you something now."

Helplessly, Trench watched her as her delicate fingers pressed the notes. He barely heard them. All his mind was concentrated on his trouble. Why could she not be honest with him? That golden head looked so aloof on her slim neck; there was pride in the line, which of all others betrays youth, running cleanly from ear to chin. She seemed unapproachable and mysterious.

As the music ceased, he crossed the room and bent down over her, his hands resting on her shoulders.

"Joceline," he asked, "you do love me? You're quite sure?" His voice shook.

"Why, Oliver!" She was amazed. "How can you doubt it? What have I done?"

"Nothing. I—just wanted to know."

She lifted her face, touched to the quick.

"Like this," she murmured, and gave him her lips.

So absorbed were they that neither noticed the door on their right silently open. For a moment a shrouded figure stood there. Under the creamy hood, a pair of dark eyes were darting a malignant, startled glance at the pair.

Joceline gave a fluttering sigh. The spring day seemed overpowering. Their eyes met. In each was the question: "Why wait? Youth is so short."

The rain came whispering against the windows. It drowned the faint sound of the closing door.

"When?" he breathed, and saw her delicate mouth quiver as he caught her reply:

"Soon . . ."

"To-morrow?" he asked absurdly, filled with the wonder of the moment.

"To-morrow." Her eyes closed; her head was heavy on his shoulder. Suddenly she started up. "Oh, Oliver, I'd forgotten mother! I must go—she'll be back from her bath."

"Damn!" He ground his heel into the parquet. "Is she always to come between us?"

"No." She laid a hand on his arm; her blue eyes were beseeching. "But not to-day—don't tell her to-day? I can't bear that you should spoil it."

"Spoil what?"

"This—our 'golden hour.'" She remembered Mrs. Bickersteth and forced a smile, but her eyes were frightened. "You promised me a week!"

"Very well." He set his teeth.

She moved away. At the door she turned and looked back.

"It's for your sake too," she told him with a note of despair.

"Why?" He started after her, heard voices in the lounge and, with an effort, checked himself. "Oh, I give it up!" he cried.

Meanwhile Joceline was making her way swiftly to the front door. The omnibus, empty, stood outside, waiting for fresh passengers. She ran back to the lift.

"Quick!" she said to the man.

Reaching her mother's door, she tapped.

"Entrez!"

Nerving herself, Joceline turned the handle.

"Oh, there you are!" Mrs. Verney smiled at her. "I was back before my time. What a day! But you should have seen our dear Mrs. Bickersteth. She looked like a seal coming out of the water! In one of those terrible oil-skin affairs. Now, darling, my dressing-gown."

Joceline inaudibly breathed: "Thank God!"

She helped her mother to lie down. There were no

questions asked to-day as to how the girl had spent the hour. Mrs. Verney seemed in her sweetest mood.

"I think I'll read," she decided. "You can give me my *Imitation of Christ*. I always find that so soothing and one can't go to church here. Although I'd planned for this afternoon to drive to Vespers at Tessé-la-Madeleine and hear that lovely music again." She alluded to the services held in the Parish Church which, owing to the fine organ, attracted not only the residents but professionals, visiting the place, who frequently sang in the choir. "But it's too wet," she decided. "We shall have to fall back on bridge. I wonder if Mrs. Bickersteth would care to join us? I had a letter yesterday from Angela Pulteney, telling me all about her. It's *Mr*. Bickersteth who is Sir Archibald's cousin. She was a Courtenay—Lord Paignton's people, the younger branch."

Off she went, on one of her favourite games of sorting the many threads which, inevitably, are knotted together somewhere, in the centuries, between ancient families.

Joceline stood, leaning on the lower rail of the bed. Full well she knew that her lover held no place in this category. He was descended from Yeoman stock, on both sides—hardier stock, well-called the "back-bone of Britain." Some instinct told her that this was what, in truth, attracted her to him: the vigour and initiative so often lacking in a strain weakened by intermarriage. But to these was allied natural refinement. There was none of the slovenliness, dulled intellect and narrow outlook which marks a certain country type closely linked to the soil. His father had been well-educated and Trench had moved among gentlepeople, both at school and at college,

had travelled and enlarged his mind. Above all, learnt control, in the bitter discipline of the trenches.

Watching the old aristocrat, Joceline realized that Oliver was her road of escape into a kinder, healthier life. For her mother was an extreme type, the result of two different strains of blood, but at heart more French than British. There was tyranny in her veins: that fatal love of power, of contempt for the *bourgeoisie* and for the class then treated as serfs, which had sent her ancestors to the tumbrel in the bloody days of Danton. She would never give her consent to Joceline's marriage with Oliver Trench.

But could she prevent it? The girl's heart sank. Was there to be another—failure!

She became aware that her mother had paused.

"Yes?" She used the first cue to hand.

Mrs. Verney nodded.

"We'll ask her at lunch. Then we can easily get a fourth. The French have no prejudices about playing cards on the Sabbath. They get their religion over early and then feel they're free for amusement. So sensible!" She smiled at her daughter. "For, after all, it's a day of rest, and rest is not idleness. Or the British idea of a heavy meal, followed by a state of coma. Where's my dear à Kempis?" She took the book in its ancient binding. It had belonged to her grandfather and inside was a faded plate with a coat-of-arms famous in French history. "Now, dear child, give me a kiss—I shan't want you until 11.00."

Mrs. Bickersteth found Trench unusually silent at lunch. She consoled herself with the study of the gay

crowd around her. As the season advanced, visitors unconnected with the cure came to Bagnoles, enjoying the tennis and other distractions. It was getting quite a fashionable resort among wealthy Parisians. And how wonderfully they wore their clothes, with an unconscious air that had nothing suggestive of "Sunday best!" The majority of the women were plain when you looked "right into" their faces, yet somehow, fascinating.

"They're certainly womanly," she thought—the nearest she could get to the secret.

Ices to-day! She loved ices, although they sometimes made her teeth ache. There were no roses without thorns, she decided philosophically, as a pain darted through her jaw. It was rheumatic weather too.

"It gets into my hones," she told Trench confidentially, and was surprised at the pain in his eyes as they turned to her face. "I expect you are feeling it?"

"I?" He smiled, forgetting his excuse for taking the cure. "I like rain. It lays the dust. I'm going for a tramp after lunch."

"With Sir Raphael?"

"No, alone. I must have some exercise."

But this plan was to be discarded. When they left the hot room, Mrs. Bickersteth, sailing through the lounge, was arrested by Mrs. Verney with the invitation to bridge.

For a moment, the younger woman hesitated. It was tempting, with nothing else to do, but against the tenets of Torlish Manor, which "kept" the Sabbath Day. Then she remembered she was in France! There was no question here of setting a good example to her servants and family.

"I should enjoy it," she responded, "though I'm not a very great player. My husband says I over-call!"

"All husbands say that." Mrs. Verney smiled. One hand on her daughter's arm, she peered, bright-eyed, at the moving throng. "Now, who shall we have for a fourth? Let's make it a British party and ask Mr. Trench to join us."

Mrs. Bickersteth drew in her breath sharply. She glanced quickly at Joceline. Every trace of colour had drained from her face. For a moment she looked on the verge of fainting. Then she caught herself in hand.

"I shouldn't think he'd care about it. A man doesn't mind the rain. He'll probably be going out."

"Still, perhaps he'll have a rubber first."

The old lady's voice was imperious. She slipped the hand from its support and tripped across to the window where Trench stood, gloomily watching the clouds veil the slopes of the hills.

"My dear"—Mrs. Bickersteth was thrilled—"she's coming round! *Isn't* that nice?"

Joceline did not answer. She was trying to catch her lover's eye, an impossible feat, owing to the people drifting in between them. All too soon, Mrs. Verney returned, Trench obediently in her wake.

"I've settled it!" Her hands fluttered with one of her foreign gestures. "This table, I think. Now, the cards? Thank you, child." She spread them fan-wise on the cloth. "We'll cut for partners."

They did so, Mrs. Bickersteth eaten up with curiosity. What was the meaning of it all? And why should the girl looked stunned?

Trench was equally mystified. He turned up the curse of Scotland.

"You and I," he said to Joceline.

"Age versus Youth," Mrs. Verney declared, and added suavely, "Though that's unfair to my partner. I was thinking of myself. Now, then!" She settled herself, with a rustle of taffeta skirts.

To-day she was dressed in black, which Mrs. Bickersteth approved. Her own religion suggested black; she was fond of the Litany and of sermons that "bring the truth home." It did one good to be roused and remember one's duty to one's neighbour. All this flashed through her mind as she dealt the cards, very slowly, careful not to turn up the corners.

Mrs. Verney watched her impatiently. Joceline's eyes were glued to the table. The silence seemed oppressive.

"It will clear later, I think," said Trench. He was uncertain of his ground.

"Not before the third rubber!" Mrs. Verney was almost coquettish as she smiled at the young man. "Now, Joceline, wake up!" She gathered her own cards together and sorted them dexterously.

Mrs. Bickersteth had no such skill. At length she looked up.

"One Diamond," she said, with an air of ponderous decision.

"One Heart." Trench stole a glance at the girl, pale and rigid, facing him.

"One No Trumps," Mrs. Verney proclaimed.

It was left at that. Joceline led a nine of hearts and

Mrs. Bickersteth, relieved, proceeded to lay down her hand.

There were six diamonds to a Queen!

"But I thought you said *Diamonds?*" Mrs. Verney's eye-brows were raised.

"One." Mrs. Bickersteth was unmoved. "Oh, by the way, what are we playing?"

"We usually play five francs a hundred. And with the exchange as it is—" Mrs. Verney playfully shrugged her shoulders. "But if you'd prefer any other stake?"

"Oh, no." Her partner straightened her back. She was not going to be patronized. She didn't mind losing money, but on Sunday five francs seemed slightly profane. Still, she must think of the young people and make it a pleasant game. "I can take that!" She nodded, pleased.

She was annoyed when Mrs. Verney picked out the ten of hearts instead of that nice, fat ace. One of her own bridge mottoes was: "Make a trick when you can."

The game proceeded, with Mrs. Verney—who had counted on diamonds—tight-lipped. She looked very old to-day, Trench thought. He wondered if Joceline's love for him had checked, or rather diverted, the flow of vital force which she passed on to her parent. She would always give with both hands. It was her glory, and her peril. In this case it didn't matter, for he made up the loss, with interest. It was strange how some people had the power of taking it out of you imperceptibly, leaving you drained, and often people with great charm. A dangerous trick when cultivated, closely allied to black magic, and known throughout the centuries, the ground-

work of ancient superstitions. It seemed to sap, not only the physical powers of the victim, but to undermine the will. Somehow, obscurely, he felt that it was going on now; that, before his eyes, Mrs. Verney was regaining her daughter. For why did Joceline look like that?

At this moment the girl revoked. Trench guessed it too late and blamed himself for forgetting to put the usual question. It would not escape those shrewd, black eyes—he looked at his neighbour stealthily. Her triumph was well-hidden. Here was one who could guard a secret. She waited, until in the last round Joceline produced the thirteenth spade.

Mrs. Verney pounced on it, with a pointed, almond-shaped nail.

"Revoke! I knew I had counted correctly."

"Oh!" The girl bit her lip. "I didn't mean to. I never saw it!"

"Exactly." Mrs. Verney chuckled. "You shouldn't dream at cards, darling."

"It was my fault," said Trench, "I should have asked her."

"Don't let's exact it?" Mrs. Bickersteth was distressed. "So easy—any one might do it."

"Game!" Mrs. Verney ignored the remark. Her pencil bit into the scoring-board. "And I certainly never expected that!" A soft colour warmed her cheeks.

"Those diamonds of yours!" she laughed across at her partner. Then her glance slipped to the man. "You'll have to keep my daughter in order," she told him airily.

Trench wondered if there could be a hidden meaning in the remark. He looked back, defying her.

"I'm quite contented with my partner."

"I'm so sorry," Joceline murmured.

"You needn't be. It's my deal, I think."

After that he played the game for all he was worth. Mrs. Verney soon realized that, at cards, she had met her match. Mrs. Bickersteth sailed in troubled waters.

"If only it would clear," she thought, "and I could get out of this! I'd willingly risk rheumatism."

But the Earth was wrapped in wet winding-sheets, Mrs. Verney indefatigable. It had come to a battle between her and Trench. By some strange chance, he was always her opponent, backed up by Joceline. The girl herself had become infected by the man's iron will. She had a superstitious feeling that whoever emerged the victor would win in the greater game.

Mrs. Verney grew peevish. She had lost three rubbers in succession, handicapped by her partner and by Trench's brilliant performance.

"Let's cut again! Or shall we have tea?" She threw up the sponge suddenly.

Mrs. Bickersteth heartily acquiesced.

"Tea, I think. I don't know why, but bridge always makes me thirsty, and I get such cold feet."

Trench laughed.

"I can sympathize! Still, it's been very pleasant. I haven't played since I left the boat, and I'm fond of it."

"You should have told us," said Mrs. Verney graciously. "But we haven't seen much of you lately. I gathered from our friend here"—she smiled at Mrs. Bickersteth—"that you'd been exploring the country, with Sir Reuben—no Sir *Raphael* Thring." She added lightly, "I never

can remember those names! Dear me, I'm quite cramped." She tottered as she moved forward. Trench offered her his arm, for Joceline was wedged in by the table. Would she take it? She did, and leaned on it deliberately. "Thanks. I'm getting a very old woman."

Trench felt bound to repudiate this.

She glanced up sideways.

"It's only my limbs, mercifully. My brain is as keen as ever."

Was it a warning? Trench wondered. He saw her as far as the lift and left her in her daughter's care. Then he rejoined Mrs. Bickersteth, who was dapping her face with her handkerchief.

"That's a wicked old woman!" She sounded hoarse. "I suppose I really oughtn't to say so. It's her hardness and her greed. But I'm glad you won. You deserved to —although I shall never understand why because I called Clubs she made it No Trumps. And seemed so injured about it too! I did it because I'd a Yarborough. Now" —she dropped her voice—"if you'll come up quietly, I'll give you a good cup of tea and we'll talk things over. Piper's there, so it's quite proper."

He was only too willing to follow her. Piper welcomed him with a smile. How nice he looked in his blue serge suit, she thought; so "upstanding," good boots, and the bright hair like "Master Dicky's," with the same straight, grey eyes. She hovered over him during tea, waiting for his second cup and worrying Mrs. Bickersteth who was longing to get him to herself. She risked offending Piper at last:

"I think we've everything we want, thank you," she said.

Piper went.

"Now!" said Mrs. Bickersteth. "What do you think it means?"

"It has me beat! But I can tell that Joceline's wor-ried."

"Well, I think"—she poured it out—"that Mrs. Verney means well. She's seen how happy the girl's looking and, although I don't like her, I believe she's really fond of her daughter. Some one's been telling tales, she's realized how it is between you and she wants to get to know you better. I don't say she'll give in at once. She's far too fond of her money. You can tell that by the way she plays, and all that talk about Monte Carlo. I wonder"—her eyes widened—"if she's a gambler? And Joceline knows it and is ashamed. Perhaps that's it—debts!"

"No." Trench shook his head. "They're well off, not short of money. Besides, who could have told her about us? We've always been so careful."

"My dear boy"—Mrs. Bickersteth smiled—"anybody might have caught you that day when I came on you in the garden. Love is blind. It's the onlooker who sees most of the game. And you're open by nature. Quite right too. I can't stand sly and deceitful young people. Why, you told me almost at once." Her face changed, became startled. "Oh, you don't think I let it out? I assure you, I've never breathed a word."

"I know you haven't. She's guessed. And now she's out to stop it. She's desperate too." His face darkened.

"Did you see that Comtesse de Mesnil pause, whilst we were playing, near the table and the look that passed between them? Mrs. Verney would never have asked me to join them—there, before the whole hotel—if she hadn't had some deep motive. To a Frenchwoman it would seem as if Mrs. Verney had changed her opinion and reckoned me up as—suitable! It was so pointed after these weeks of studied indifference. And yet Joceline looked crushed. If she hurts her, I'll—" He brought down his left fist, clenched, on his knee and very nearly upset his tea-cup.

"Take care!" Mrs. Bickersteth had jumped. "But they wouldn't break—they're only enamel. Dear me, it is perplexing. I shall pray for you both to-night—sixpence a hundred is quite enough on a Sunday, to my mind." Trench failed to follow this. "Perhaps I was wrong in playing at all. Still I lost—that should count. Did you see her rings? That diamond one. I hope she'll leave it to Joceline." She was tired and incoherent.

Trench realized this and rose to his feet.

"It's stopped raining. I must get out. Thank you so much for all your kindness."

"I wish I could help you more—there! I nearly called you 'Dicky.'" Her eyes filled. She held out her hand to him. Rather clumsily, he kissed it, feeling there was nothing to say. "It will all come right, Oliver."

But Trench was too worried to agree.

CHAPTER IX

RS. BICKERSTETH came up to bed complaining of rheumatic pains.

"It was the bridge," she said to Piper. "Such a draught along the floor. I can't think how Mrs. Verney stands it, and there she is, at it again! There can't be much the matter with her." She frowned. "I like a pleasant game, but her kind's such a tax on the brain! It's in my right knee to-night."

Piper, accustomed to take short cuts across her mistress' conversation, briskly made a suggestion:

"A good, hot bath, ma'am, with a spoonful of mustard in it? Not the sort they gives you here, stale-looking and no bite, but from the tin I brought with me. Colman's." She sighed. The very name roused a sudden longing for home.

"Very well." Mrs. Bickersteth sighed too. "It's all right in good weather, but there's no real comfort abroad, with curtains that don't meet and these horrid slippery floors. Though the beds—" She paused. "Do you know, Nanna, that they rip them open, clean the contents, and make them up again every year?"

"Not necessary," said Piper tartly. A horrific vision of the result of this visit to Bagnoles: twenty mattresses laid waste in the shrouded bedrooms at Torlish Manor rose like a nightmare, before her. Though, perhaps, for the French—" She sneered. Still, they must lose a lot of 'air."

It was rarely that she dropped an "H." and Mrs. Bickersteth looked puzzled.

"But it is to air them," she insisted.

"I meant the horse-hair," breathed Piper.

Mrs. Bickersteth's face went blank.

"Of course! Stupid of me, but I'm worried about those two young people."

Had Trench been present, he might have divined what his friend had really meant when she talked of "belonging," like the old oaks. For centuries past, from the days of youth, one rule had held among her kind—save for those "black sheep" dear to authors—that of a courtesy extended to those of a lower class far deeper than to her own. She had seen her own young brother thrashed for insolent conduct to a groom. Noblesse oblige was not an empty formula. It implied control, and reverence for those with fewer advantages; the true meaning of "gentle" birth, according to Mrs. Bickersteth's creed. She could have whipped herself for her mistake. Poor old Nanna!

"So clever of you to have brought the mustard," she went on soothingly. "But then, you think of everything!" Piper's lined face relaxed.

"I'll go and see if the bathroom's clear, if you'll get ready, ma'am."

Mrs. Bickersteth made her preparations, screwing her hair on the top of her head and covering it with a boudoir-cap rather like a Roman helmet.

Presently Piper returned.

"It'll have to be the far bath. This one's got a Frenchman in it."

"But how do you know it's a man?" Mrs. Bickersteth was amused by the scorn in her voice.

"I heard him, ma'am," said Piper darkly. "Still, even the children here do it! I never allowed my children to behave like that, I'm sure. You'd think they'd all got consumption! Now, ma'am. I've turned on the water."

The procession formed. Piper went first, bearing the sponges and soap in a dish. She looked like a Vestal Virgin, guarding the sacred flame. Mrs. Bickersteth, majestic, followed, in a toga of Imperial Purple. Her face, with no vestige of softening hair, was massive and oddly sexless, suggesting that of some marble bust. So Cæsar might have passed to his bath.

To complete the august effect, she carried a sceptre in her hand: a round loofah, attached to a long wooden handle. It was destined to find that spot in her back which otherwise she "missed!" Mrs. Bickersteth, through some early confusion, invariably called it "my toofah."

Piper carefully mixed the mustard and retired, with a last injunction from her mistress:

"Watch for me coming out and see there's no one about."

Soon she was soaking peacefully. Her thoughts turned to Torlish Monor. She had received a letter from Elsie that morning and it was still in her bag. She stretched out a wet arm, gingerly seized the former and extracted the envelope. Keeping them out of the reach of the water, she re-read the untidy pages:

DEAREST MATER:

I'm answering your letter to me and Father both together, because he's rather busy to-day. The gale brought down that old elm in front of Bennett's cottage, and it's lying right across the lane. It smashed the fence and gave old Susan a nasty fright—but she's better. I took her a bottle of port. That cheered the old girl up, though she wanted to lay it by for her funeral! I put a stop to that nonsense. Now about yours.

Mrs. Bickersteth started. "Oh, my letter, she means." She read on:

Father and I can't understand it. First you say we must "wait" and then that Father "must decide." Then again that there's "no hurry." But there is! You don't seem to understand how important it all is to me. The sooner I start work the better. Father's been telling me all about the estate and how hard up we really are. Well, doesn't that prove that I'm right? That we all ought to turn to. Winyard and Delmé are here now and they quite agree with me. (The school closed on account of measles and Adela sent them to us.) Winyard is awfully keen. He wants to be a market-gardener and Delmé—he's only a kid, of course, but he's got his head screwed on-hopes to learn motoring, so that he can drive a lorry and take Winyard's green stuff, and my butter and eggs, etc., into Exeter by road. That will save the freight, you see? Then we've got an idea about the old mill—to grind our corn and the farmers' ourselves. When Chrissy comes down I'm going to talk to her seriously. It'll do Spencer good to work. I'd just love to see him a miller—then all his socks and ties would match! The flour would see to that! And what's the good of his going to Eton and spending his holidays in visits to his London pals? He ought to be learning about the country, if he's going to run the place when Uncle Henry pegs out. I get fed-up with him!

Well, anyhow, you see the idea? Between the pack of us, we ought to put Torlish on its legs. Thank goodness, we haven't got mortgages—Father's been wise there. Though that's why he let part of the shooting to that awful Sir Cecil Fownes. She's taken to stopping Father now as he comes out of church, and it makes him furious, because of the servants getting out early on Sunday afternoons. He told her so once, and Lady Fownes said: "Oh? My servants do what I like," and added, "I give them good money." And she always winds up in the same way: "I'm such a busy woman, with all my Charities in town," and reels off a string of names of people she sits with on Committees, beginning with Princess Mary!

A pity she doesn't *stay* in town! Winyard swears that he found her the other day watching a nuthatch in a tree and waiting for it to *cuckoo!*

And Sir Cecil trots after her looking like a cocker spaniel, breathless with admiration. That puzzled me until I remembered it was his *father* who made the business. I'd sooner have known the old man.

Well, now, to get back to mine. I know it means expense at first, but I shan't want any frocks. I'm always happier in breeches, and there won't be time for parties. Only I must let the College know. I've been awfully patient and I do think you might send me a wire. Do? You don't know how I'm worrying! Love from

ELSIE.

P.S. The new foal's a beauty! Hope you're better?

"It's ridiculous"—Mrs. Bickersteth sighed—"for those children to talk like that." She put the letter, sticky with

steam, on the chair by her side. "They seem to want to turn the place into a sort of Co-operative Store! Still, if the child's fretting, a telegram might soothe her. But Richard shouldn't be so weak. Piper can take it early to-morrow."

As she dried herself, she composed the message, cutting out all the words she could, for the sake of economy. Eventually satisfied, she donned her warm dressing-gown, found a pencil in her bag and wrote it, on Elsie's envelope.

It ran, addressed to her daughter:

Cannot decide due thought but may hope love Mother.

"And I think that's kind," she decided. "She means well, but of course she's young, and these queer ideas are in the air." Her mind turned to her new neighbours, the Fowneses. "It's strange"—she addressed the loofah, as she squeezed the water out of it—"that they want to forget their business, and my children want to start one?"

She could find no answer to this riddle, though, nebulously, in her mind, rose a vague conviction that it didn't matter what you did if you did it well and honestly. It was this *pretence* she couldn't stand, the false shame, not of the founder, but of his heirs regarding the source of their affluence, and their contempt for those beneath them when they stood perched on their new heights. No wonder the shrewd peasantry, though willing to profit by employment, noted this and christened them "upstarts." She did not carry her philosophy far enough to realize that in this changed world, since the War, her own class most closely approached the true ideals of democracy.

She unlocked the door. No sign of Piper, but the passage was empty. She ventured forth.

As she came near the lift, Joceline emerged from her mother's room. She crossed the corridor, on uncertain steps and paused, a hand against the farther wall, as though her strength had given out.

"My dear!" Mrs. Bickersteth hurried forward, forgetful of her appearance, for the girl's face was ghastly. "Aren't you feeling well? There—lean on me."

"It's nothing. Just—a little faint."

Her voice barely reached Mrs. Bickersteth as she stood, supporting the slender figure. To her relief, at that moment, Piper hurried down the passage. Their eyes met comprehensively. Here was something they both understood.

"A little sal volatile and it will soon pass off," Mrs. Bickersteth said in her comforting way. "Shall Piper bring it here, or can you get as far as my room, dear?"

"Oh, not here," the girl whispered, with a nervous look at her mother's door. "I'll come—yes. So stupid of me!"

Between them, they helped her into safety. When she reached the arm-chair, she collapsed. But soon Piper was holding the medicine glass to her lips.

"Drink, my lamb," the old nurse told her.

Joceline, with an effort, obeyed.

"That's right!" Mrs. Bickersteth stood, calm and smiling, above her. "I expect it's the thunder weather." There wasn't a vestige of electricity in the air, but she always provided a reason for illness—a straw to which the patient could cling! "Now, don't you talk. Lean

back and rest. Why, you're getting a better colour already."

Soon, between the restorative and the power of suggestion, Joceline stirred and pronounced herself "quite all right."

"But I shan't let you go just yet." Mrs. Bickersteth crossed the room and murmured in Piper's ear.

"Yes, ma'am." Piper nodded. "I understand, but I'm just going to put a match to the fire. After your hot bath, ma'am."

"Well, it isn't a bad idea." She turned quickly, for Joceline had risen.

"I'm keeping you up. And you've been so kind!" She clutched at the chair, still a little unsteady.

"Yes, you're chilly. We'll pull up to the stove and have a little chat. I don't feel in the least sleepy."

Soon the fir-cones were crackling, and the pleasant smell of burning wood brought its suggestion of home to both, those big logs of winter days. Piper had vanished. Side by side, they watched the little flames spurt up, to merge and send forth a cheerful glow.

"And now, tell me all about it." Mrs. Bickersteth's voice was like velvet. "I've three daughters of my own and they always come to me in their troubles. You weren't faint for nothing, child. You've had some sort of a shock to-night. It will do you good to share the burden, and I'm perfectly safe. I shan't repeat it."

Joceline seemed to hesitate. Then she lifted her weary eyes.

"Mother knows."

She sounded hopeless.

"About your engagement to Oliver? Well, isn't it better that she should?" Mrs. Bickersteth took the nearest hand in hers. "You can't go on for ever like this."

"It's the end," said Joceline. A little shiver ran over her.

"Come, come! You're overwrought." Mrs. Bickersteth pressed the slender fingers that lay, still chilly, in her own. "You mean that your mother may not approve? But look how she has changed to-day. So nice to Oliver!" The girl did not answer. "Won't you tell me what you're thinking?"

The sapphire eyes searched her face.

All the natural goodness of the woman, tested by the long years, shone out of it on the lonely girl and gave it a dignity which lifted it far above the disadvantages of her costume. It even gave this the illusion of being fitting: a holy robe of motherhood, draped over the full bosom where children had been rocked to sleep. Here was wisdom and repose.

"I'll tell you!" It was almost a cry.

"That's right. You can trust me." Mrs. Bickersteth smiled at her.

"And you won't let Oliver guess? You'll promise me?"
Joceline urged.

"Oliver?" The other was startled. "But surely you tell him everything? The man you are going to marry." She felt the girl shrink back. "One minute—I must think! Is it anything he ought to know, or just some private

trouble? You see, I'm his friend too, and I mustn't be disloyal."

"It's nothing like that," the girl murmured. "It concerns"—she paused—"my mother."

"Ah!" Mrs. Bickersteth's lips tightened.

"But I can't bear him to know it! All—all I've gone through. If I tell you, you must promise?" Her voice changed, grew suddenly bitter. "It will make no difference in the end. He'll go away. I can see it coming."

"Never!" Mrs. Bickersteth sounded indignant. "Oliver is as true as steel. And he worships the ground you tread on!"

"So did—" The girl bit her lip.

"Those others?" Mrs. Bickersteth suggested. She was torn by pity and curiosity.

She saw amazement spring up in Joceline's pale face. "How did you know?" Her speech quickened. "Mother told you! What did she say? Did she tell you how—how—" With an effort, she checked herself.

"Now, look here, my dear"—Mrs. Bickersteth's mind was resolved—"you must tell me everything. Otherwise, I can't help you. If you say I shall not be doing Oliver an injustice in giving you my word, I promise you I will not repeat it. That's settled, then"—she pressed the girl's hand—"but I must have the whole truth. Now, take your time and don't work yourself up. You can't afford to be ill at this crisis."

"It won't make any difference. When Oliver speaks to mother—and she means him to confide in her; I guessed that this afternoon—then she'll send him away! I've seen it before. Of course it all sounds mad to you,

but you don't know what I've been through! It's something she tells them. About me."

"But what?" Mrs. Bickersteth was shocked. She read the answer in Joceline's eyes. "You mean to say you don't *know?*"

"I haven't the faintest notion! That's the truth—on my honour." Her lip quivered; tears blurred her sight. "But I've seen it—seen the change in them. The way they look at me!" She put her hands up over her face. "Afterwards—before they go. As if—as if I'd cheated them. Or wasn't—wasn't—" She broke down. "Oh, I can't bear it with Oliver! I love him so. I know now that those others didn't count. I was fond of them—and so unhappy! I wanted to get away from home. But I didn't understand. Oliver is my life." She sobbed, on that comfortable shoulder, as Mrs. Bickersteth's arm went round her.

"Hush, hush, my poor child!" She was utterly mystified, but she waited patiently for the girl to regain her control, aware that tears relieved the tension. "Now, we must be reasonable. Two heads are better than one and I want to ask you a few questions."

"Please do. Anything!" Joceline was wiping her eyes. "When did you first notice this?"

"When Howard Gringold went away. Oh, of course you don't know—"

"Yes, I do. Never mind how. You noticed it before he left?"

"The morning he sailed. He was staying with us and, the night before, he sat up late, after I'd gone to bed, talking things over with mother. She had seemed quite pleased at our engagement, especially when it was decided that I should not go out to Uganda, but wait until he retired. But she didn't want it announced. Old Lady Scrope was still alive, though very ill, and she had been so devoted to Roland. You understand?" Mrs. Bickersteth nodded. "Of course I didn't like Howard's sailing. We had arranged to meet early for a last talk in the garden, but when I came down he wasn't there! When he did appear he looked dreadful, as if he hadn't slept all night, and I felt—oh, it's difficult to explain! He was changed. There seemed a wall between us, even when he said good-bye. I've never forgotten the look he gave me as the train left the platform. Broken-hearted—almost suspicious, as though he'd lost his trust in me!"

"And your mother?"

"Mother was very kind. Both then and when his letter came, saying he had changed his mind and thought he could not afford to marry." Her breath caught and she clenched her hands. "He could! It was an empty excuse."

"Yes." Mrs. Bickersteth nodded gravely. She was thinking "Suspicious"? A curious word. "My dear"—her voice was very gentle—"I suppose there is nothing—" She started again. "Young people are sometimes foolish. I don't mean anything really wrong, but they do impulsive things and the world is uncharitable. Is there anything your mother knows which she thinks she ought to tell a man who will be her son-in-law?"

The girl raised her head and looked back proudly into the other's troubled face.

"Nothing! I'm not like that. I can say honestly that

I'm not ashamed of what I've done. I've hothing to hide in my life. I'm"—her lips curled—"too proud."

"I felt that!" Mrs. Bickersteth kissed the wet cheek on which a flush had risen. "But I had to ask—it's all so perplexing. And you're not *really* delicate? Your father was a healthy man?"

She was skirting the question in her mind, but Joceline divined it.

"There's nothing in the family—if that's what you mean. Like consumption or cancer. Father was one of the strongest people I've ever met and, although mother's heart is weak, she's really wonderful for her age. As for me, I've never had a serious illness until that breakdown years ago—and that was only nerves. I ought to know! I was overhauled by one doctor after another, and they all said it was temporary, the result of trouble and strain, that my organs were perfectly sound. No, it isn't that. But what can it be? I've gone nearly mad trying to solve it."

"And of course you've never questioned your mother?"
"How could I?" The girl shrank back. "I've no proofs. She would only laugh at me! When she's angry, mother can be cruel. I've never forgotten her telling me once that I must be more careful in my attitude to men, as if—as if I ran after them! And she added, 'Men tire of girls like that.' As though it had been my own fault. That was after—" She hesitated.

Mrs. Bickersteth filled the gap:

"Some other man who admired you."

"Yes. Two years later, at Mentone. He was brought to our Villa by some friends. He was on leave from his

ship and I liked him from the first. He was so happy"her smile was sad—"just like sunshine. He did me good. We were never engaged," she added quickly, "but I knew that he cared. He let me see it. I hadn't been really sure about mother—about her sending Howard away—until then, when the same thing happened. She took Terence for a drive, and he went off the same night! I shouldn't have known, but I'd walked down to the station to say good-bye to another friend, and there he was with his luggage. When he saw me he looked for a moment as if he would turn and fly! But he came up and explained that he'd been recalled to his ship, by a telegram. He didn't make a good liar." The girl's lips curled bitterly. "But that wasn't all. I suppose I felt hurt and I might have been over-sensitive, but it seemed to me that, somehow"—her voice shook—"he had lost his respect! The way he looked— Even Barbara saw it. He didn't wait, just got into his carriage, after shaking hands with us. She smiled, and whispered: 'So you've turned the poor boy down!' When I went home, I told mother that he'd left and gave his excuse. All she said was: 'What a pity! You'll miss him at tennis, darling.' But I knew. I've known ever since. And so, I've avoided men." She turned in her chair and faced the absorbed listener. "I didn't want to know Oliver. But it happened. Perhaps I've been weak, but you can't guess what he is to me! I'd go away with him to-morrow—to the other end of the world. I don't care how poor we are. I want to help him —to work for him. I've never felt like that before. I'd cook and scrub—do anything, if only I could make him

happy! But all the time I've been afraid. I knew that it wouldn't last."

"But it will." Mrs. Bickersteth sniffed. This time it was to keep back her tears. She had never heard anything so poignant as the note of despair in the still voice. "It shall. Oliver must be warned."

"Oh, no, no!" The girl was frightened. "I'm still praying it mayn't happen. I don't want my money—mother can have it. Though it isn't only that. In her own way, she's devoted to me. But it's always been the same—her jealousy and love of possession. These last weeks I've seen it clearly—"

Mrs. Bickersteth interrupted her:

"You must tell him."

"I can't!" The girl's head went up. "She's my mother. It's treacherous. And I have no proofs—I can only guess. I've been so careful all along not to rouse Oliver's suspicions. I've played the game. Father would say so."

"My dear, my dear," Mrs. Bickersteth wailed. "You can't sacrifice yourself like this! It isn't right—not what God intended. He meant you to marry Oliver. You've your duty to him as well."

She paused, for the girl's face had changed. The tension of her pose relaxed. Her blue eyes were fixed on space, as though some vision rose before her, some hope beyond material promise.

Her lips moved. Mrs. Bickersteth, leaning forward, caught the words:

"Then we must leave it in His hands. I—hadn't thought of that."

CHAPTER X

RS. BICKERSTETH sat in a chair at the far end of the terrace enjoying the drowsy post-prandial hour. On her knee was a new novel, received that morning from Adela, who wrote: "You ought to read it, mother."

It was strange, she thought, that the literature one "ought" to read was never the most enjoyable. Could it be the hint of compulsion—or merely that she was old-fashioned? This was one of those brilliant, modern novels in which, as she expressed it, "You have to count back the lines to find out who is saying what." Mrs. Bickersteth sighed. She was sure it would have an unhappy ending, or break off suddenly, leaving the reader in midair. She resented unhappy endings. They were untrue to romance. There was too much "real sorrow" in life to be harrowed by pain in fiction.

"So unnecessary!" She closed the book.

Her thoughts turned to Joceline and the scene in the bedroom two nights ago. It had brought no visible fruition. Mrs. Bickersteth was dissatisfied. Trench seemed grave and reticent, the girl more elusive than ever. Alone, Mrs. Verney flitted across the scene, dainty and capricious, gracious to the young man, outwardly loving to her daughter.

Joceline seemed to have relapsed into that state of lethargy which Mrs Bickersteth had regretted in the first days at Bagnoles. Vis-à-vis to Trench, the poor lady felt guilty. If only she could give him a hint, warn him against Mrs. Verney! But she had "promised" Joceline. The secret weighed on her like lead.

At the moment, the trio were not to be seen. The girl had looked very wan at lunch and Mrs. Bickersteth remembered that this was the day which should terminate the week's respite granted by Trench. A little thrill ran through her. What would happen when the curtain rang up on the second act, and how would Mrs. Verney behave? Was it possible she would give her consent, or would the comedy turn to drama?

The terrace was gay this afternoon, full of groups round the tables, or chattering near the parapet. In the air was the light, heady note of Gallic conversation, with a sense of perpetual movement. They were never still when they talked, she thought. No repose! In the sunshine the scene reminded her of a toy loved in her youth; a box filled with brightly-coloured fragments of glass, which spun round on a handle and presented a series of dazzling effects. Mrs. Bickersteth blinked, but enjoyed it. So "foreign," she decided.

Through the lounge door came the Comtesse de Mesnil, with her elegant but elderly figure, her long, myopic eyes narrowed as she peered at the various coteries. She moved slowly down the terrace, seeking a vacant place and hesitated near the table chosen by Mrs. Bickersteth, an empty chair at her side.

The latter caught the Frenchwoman's inquiring glance and the half-smile that accompanied it.

"Bon jour!" She mastered her nervousness. "Ne

voulez pas avoir cette chaise?" ("Avoir" somehow did not sound right?)

"I do not derange you, madame?"

"Pas de tout." Mrs. Bickersteth beamed and observed that it was fine weather, as the Countess gracefully settled herself.

She opened the ball with a query respecting the book on the other's knee. Mrs. Bickersteth laboriously explained.

"Tiens! Madame your daughter writes? What a talent! You must be proud of her." She raised her lorgnettes to study a pair not far from them. "Pretty, the line, is it not?"

Her slight gesture embraced a new costume worn by Pallôt's mannequin.

Mrs. Bickersteth assented.

"Though I shouldn't care for green myself," she added. "Such an unlucky colour."

"The colour of Spring," murmured the Countess.

They both watched the handsome girl who was flirting with a young Frenchman, where she stood, her back to the parapet, playing with an enamelled medallion that hung from a fine cord round her throat and matched her long, swinging earrings.

He was evidently teasing her, criticizing the model gown. Presently, emboldened by her easy manner, he drew up a fold of the draped skirt, re-arranging it to his fancy.

"Comme ça!" they heard him say. "Oh, I have the good taste. I know myself in these affairs!" and he gave her a provocative glance.

Mrs. Bickersteth stiffened. He shouldn't touch her. She remarked upon it to her companion and the obvious flirtation in a carefully subdued voice.

"It is a distraction," the other said lightly. "There is not much for a young man to do in a place like Bagnoles. He sacrifices himself to his mother who did not care to come alone."

Another admirer sauntered up and joined in the argument. He, too, held views on the dress and aired them vivaciously. He offered the girl a cigarette and proceeded to light it for her, with a good deal of by-play. Mrs. Bickersteth knew him by sight as the husband of one of those taking the cure, an attractive Parisian. And there she sat, at the next table, as indifferent as the Countess to her husband's need of a "distraction"! For by now the two men were openly vying for the handsome girl's favours.

She entered into the game with gusto, making use of her dark eyes, and shrewdly realizing that it was all good for business, drawing attention to her clothes which roused envy among the women.

"Dites donc, mademoiselle," said the older man, "it is true, this history that I hear concerning a bain forcé?"

"Ah, ça!" The mannequin shrugged her shoulders, amused, and blew a little ring of smoke into the face too near her own. She apologized, laughing, "Mille pardons, monsieur!" and scattered the smoke with her hand.

"Always the little game of defence?" he retorted, with an air of malice.

Mme. de Mesnil smiled and turned to her absorbed companion.

"They talk of that affair at the Baths. Without doubt, you have heard it, madame? It is incredible that a doctor could be—si peu convenable! Enfin, he merited his fate."

Mrs. Bickersteth, curious, disclaimed the knowledge and begged for information.

It appeared that the "grande fille de chez Pallôt" had decided to take a light course of baths. She had chosen a certain young doctor but lately come to the town and whom she had seen in her walks abroad. The Countess skilfully glided over the commencement of their acquaintance and brought the story to its climax. The doctor had lost his head one morning and attempted to embrace his patient, during his visit to her at the Baths. The girl, with a calculated malice, had thrown her arms round his neck and purposely upset his balance. Slipping on the wet floor, he had plunged head foremost into the water, to emerge, soaked and chastened, and run the gauntlet of the amused Establishment, with no change nearer than his Villa! All the town was laughing at him and he would certainly lose his post.

He had not been prepared to *test* the waters, the Countess concluded, smiling. A case of "Physician, heal thyself!"

Mrs. Bickersteth was shocked to the core. Not only did the story disgust her, but Mme. de Mesnil's attitude. This elegant grande dame, to relate the adventure with open amusement?

Mme. de Mesnil, aware of this, adroitly turned the conversation. You never knew where you stood with the English, one minute friendly, the next farouche! Yet

Mrs. Verney had enjoyed it, adding her own witty comment, with her soft, tinkling laugh. The Countess began to talk of her: her charm, her "sentiment of the costume," her conversation—"si spirituel!" (This puzzled Mrs. Bickersteth who thought she meant "spiritual.") Mme. de Mesnil went on to discuss Joceline. A beautiful face, but a little sad? It was strange that the girl remained single—she had known them for three consecutive seasons. In France, a marriage would have been arranged long ago by the parents, especially as—so she gathered—the dot must be considerable?

"A thousand pounds," Mrs. Bickersteth mentioned.

"Pas mal!" She was turning it into francs. "Still, I should have expected more."

Mrs. Bickersteth stared.

"Than a thousand a year?"

Mme. de Mesnil exclaimed at this. Annually? Not possible! Then the girl was a great heiress? Rapidly, in her mind, she ran through her male relations. There was Jean de Mesnil, her husband's nephew, of whom every one said it was time that he "ranged himself"—paying his debts, in the usual fashion. The religion was a difficulty, but that might be overcome. Suddenly she remembered Trench and his all too obvious attentions. With skill, she introduced his name. It was evident that he was seriously épris. Would he "make the demand" to Mrs. Verney? Of late, things seemed to point to it. The parent had changed her attitude. But perhaps, she had been making inquiries regarding his income and family? It was well, since Miss Verney was a great heiress, and the mother seemed devoted to her—charming, the way she

spoke of her child! Possibly, this afternoon, something might be arranged? She sighed, remembering the fortune, and the dire needs of her nephew, Jean. What that infatuation had cost him! And not even a first-class actress. Yes, it was time he took a wife and gave up his present *train*.

She started at the sound of her neighbour's puzzled voice:

"This afternoon? Je ne comprends pas." Mrs. Bickersteth smiled comfortably, for that sentence had come very pat.

"Ah, you did not know? They drive together. I heard Mme. Verney invite him as I stood in the lounge. Without doubt, it is an occasion that she offers him for the first approach." With this she made a graceful excuse and rose to her feet: "Au revoir, madame," and trailed off down the terrace which was rapidly emptying.

Mrs. Bickersteth remained, thoughtful, digesting this information. A sense of coming disaster oppressed her as she pulled her chair farther into the shade under her own balcony. Was this drive the result of Trench's desire to put an end to his suspense and purposely manœuvred by him? Or a fresh move in the game on Mrs. Verney's part, the occasion she sought to— What did she do? What was it she told these men?

Peace settled on the terrace. In the garden below, white skirts fluttered within the cage of the tennis court. The French boy, with his shameless legs, was playing ball with his sisters; in an excited but aimless fashion that had nothing in common with English games: He would trickle the ball down a slope to the smallest child and,

when she caught it, run down and take it away from her. No method, thought the onlooker. Why didn't he let her throw it back? Their voices rose, shrill and febrile, whilst under a tree their mother sat and drew swift, determined stitches in her endless embroidery. Occasionally she would look up and call to them: "Doucement, doucement!" or beckon to her elder daughter and refasten the big bow which secured her long plaits. They hung stiffly on either side of the parting down the back of her head and at dinner were coiled into shiny buns over her ears.

Most unhealthy, Mrs. Bickersteth decided. The child would certainly grow up deaf. Their clothes, too, were ridiculous. Children's everyday frocks should be plain, with plenty of freedom for their limbs. But the French were a strange race. She thought of that horrible story. A doctor, to behave like that! Piper was right. They were immoral.

She was feeling drowsy with the heat. Her eyelids closed and her double chin nodded down on to her chest.

The sound of a light step disturbed her, echoing through the deserted terrace. With a jerk, she raised her head and saw Joceline approaching.

"Well, my dear?" She smiled at the girl, who halted before her chair. "So you've not gone out with your mother?"

"No, I had a headache and she made me lie down." Her lips curved. "As a matter of fact, it seemed an excuse for a quiet hour with Oliver, but I couldn't warn him when I went up. Do you know where he is?" She saw Mrs. Bickersteth's eyes widen. "I mean, if he's still about the place?"

"Sit down, dear. You shouldn't stand in the sun without a hat. It's shady here." She patted the chair beside her, aware of acute uneasiness. "Oliver has gone for a drive," she said, as the girl obeyed her.

Joceline started, guessing the truth.

"Not with mother? How—where? But he promised me another day!"

"Your mother asked him. It wasn't his fault." Mrs. Bickersteth met the sapphire eyes as composedly as she could. "Now, you mustn't get fancies into your—"

"Fancies!" Joceline interrupted her. "She's going to tell him—to send him away. I might have guessed it!"

In the silence that followed, from below, came a repressive French voice:

"Doucement, Pierre! Non, non, ce n'est pas gentil, mon fils."

Then the silence fell again, with a sense of disaster.

Mrs. Bickersteth determinedly broke it.

"Oliver will not believe her."

There was no response. Joceline sat rigid, looking down at her hands, tightly clasped in her lap. At last, she straightened her slender neck, her eyes lifted to the hills, wooded and mysterious, against a sky where the blue was broken by drifting wisps of cloud that held a suggestion of widespread wings.

"If she drives him away"—her voice was repressed—
"I shall not stay with mother. I know now what I shall do."

"What?" Mrs. Bickersteth felt anxious. The girl's calm seemed unnatural.

"I shall join Mary—become a nun. I must have something," she whispered, "and perhaps, from the first, this was—intended."

"You don't mean—you can't mean become a Roman Catholic?" Mrs. Bickersteth was horrified. Her own religion was well-defined. She called herself "a Protestant." All her servants were "Church of England." By which she meant Low Church, with a flavour of her early days, hallowed by Queen Victoria, Defender of the Faith, God bless her! Not for the mistress of Torlish Manor did the "sons of God" shout for joy. They knelt and whispered into their hats. She was stunned by Joceline's confession. This was what came, she thought, of Mrs. Verney's Ritualism—incense, banners and processions, which, as every one knew, decked the road to Rome.

"Neither fish, fowl, nor good red herring!" In her absorption, she cried it aloud, and Joceline glanced sideways, startled. "It's true." Mrs. Bickersteth waxed incoherent. "They all did it—Manning, Newman—" She pulled herself up. "My dear child, I'm shocked to hear of this new idea. Really, I'd thought better of you!"

"But it isn't new," Joceline corrected. "I was brought up in a convent, and I've often wanted to return there. It's more difficult nowadays, since so many Orders have been dispersed, but I could enter a nursing one."

Mrs. Bickersteth lost all patience.

"You'd be better nursing your own children! That's what the Almighty intended. You don't deserve Oliver. I never thought you'd give in like this. It isn't"—she choked—"it isn't British!"

It was her most deadly insult.

The girl rose to her feet.

"You don't understand."

"I do understand. You haven't had my experience-"

"But I have my own," Joceline slipped in.

"Pouf!" said Mrs. Bickersteth.

Joceline's hand came down on her shoulder, light as a willow leaf.

"I'm sorry. You've been so kind to me."

Mrs. Bickersteth resisted the faint entreaty in the words. She stared, with blank eyes, before her, over that happy pastoral scene which had first breathed romance to her. She was not narrow-minded, she told herself, but one couldn't trifle with Belief. She prayed for the heathen and pitied them—they were ignorant and underclad—but a renegade filled her with horror. To deny one's Faith and adopt another, seemed to her like denying Honour. She must not be weak, but speak her mind.

"Joceline," she began.

She looked up and gasped. The girl was gone! She had drifted away whilst Mrs. Bickersteth was framing a powerful attack on the Papacy. The terrace, partly veiled in shadow thrown by the hotel walls, was empty, save for a solitary waiter who was collecting coffee-cups and putting order among the chairs. He caught her gesture of surprise and advanced, a tray poised on one hand.

"Oui, madame?"

Mrs. Bickersteth blinked.

"Rien," she said severely.

"Bien, madame."

He bowed and retreated. All the English were mad!

The sun was sinking over the hills of La Mayence when Mrs. Bickersteth, hot and weary, dropped onto-a seat near the Saut du Capucin, thankful for a respite from duty. The doctor had ordered more exercise. Gallantly, she obeyed him.

She could see, directly below her, the roof of the Baths and the gleaming water where it widened into a lake, but it made her giddy to look down and her eyes travelled slowly past the road veiled in trees to the Château de la Roche-Bagnoles, with its wide and verdant park. Beyond, across the valley, were masses of piled boulders that rose, like a vast, ruined wall, to the heights where the Roc du Chien commanded the countryside.

Mrs. Bickersteth tried in vain to make out the head of a dog. Here was another disillusion! Long ago, she had promised herself this steep climb and, so to speak, a sight of the Dog face to face. For a moment she caught herself wishing that she had never come to Bagnoles; then chid herself for ingratitude. The cure was succeeding beyond her hopes, but she was sad at heart. More than ever, she desired this marriage between the harassed young people. For Joceline was weak, Trench her only remaining hope. He must save the girl—a nun, indeed! She sniffed, her Roman nose in the air.

At this juncture she became aware of the man on whom she pinned her faith. He was coming down the hill towards her, recklessly, in great strides. At the sight of his face, her heart sank. For Trench looked driven by the Furies! What could have happened? Her body went stiff and the hand grasping her walking-stick trembled.

He would have swung past her blindly, had she not called him by name.

"Oliver!"

With an effort, as though he turned on a brake, he checked himself, his heels grinding into the path.

"Oh, dear, whatever's the matter?" she cried.

"The matter?" He seemed to collect his wits. "Nothing! I can't tell you."

"But you must." She laid a hand on his arm, gazing up at his strained face. "Where have you left Mrs. Verney?"

"At a Villa." He jerked his head backwards. "I can't stay. I've something to do. Sorry!"

Before she could say any more he had shaken off her hand and started forward down the incline. He turned the corner and was gone.

Mrs. Bickersteth sat there, stunned.

"What can she have told him? It's her doing!" She addressed the Roc du Chien, frowning down on the peaceful valley. "It's something dreadful—I can feel it—or he'd never look like that." And suddenly, click! went a little door in her memory. Again she heard the girl's voice: "The way—the way they look at me!"

Mrs. Bickersteth blinked. The scene swam before her eyes.

"And it might have been Dicky himself," she thought, "when he wouldn't stop and listen—the day he let the pony down."

A fugitive breeze stole through the trees and she shivered, for she was over-heated. Across the wide gulf, it seemed to her that the great rock had altered its shape. A dog's head grinned back, sable against the evening sky. Evil too—like Mrs. Verney!

"I can't stay here." She rose to her feet, suddenly faced with a glimpse of Nature, no longer smiling, but ruthless, mother of secrets unknown to man. "I must go home and talk to Piper."

But Piper brought little consolation. The whole affair was outside her homely range of experience. Her sympathy was all for Trench. She was even more shocked than her mistress by Joceline's calm confession. For Piper had been brought up in the fold of Methodism. She had been torn from her predilections by the necessity of taking the children to Torlish Church, adopting the "ways of the gentry," yet remaining friendly with "chapel-folk." Even the minister understood this.

"It's her French blood—it's no good to her," she informed Mrs. Bickersteth, who added the last touch to her toilet, in the shape of an Egyptian scarf heavily encrusted with metal and owning a curious musty smell, vaguely suggestive of ginger. A "foreign smell," Piper called it. "I saw Mrs. Verney come in, ma'am. She was looking just the same."

"She would." Mrs. Bickersteth straightened the jet comb in her hair. "I shall come to bed early."

"You'll find me here, ma'am," was Piper's response.

Staunch—that was her unfailing charm. Her mistress felt comforted.

She went down alone in the lift. The smallest chasseur's eyes were red. He had narrowly escaped dismissal

through loitering on a town errand. Everybody seemed in trouble! Mrs. Bickersteth promptly tipped him and was warmed by the smile he gave her when she stepped forth, with dignity. Youth. It was very dear to her. Poor Oliver—poor, poor boy!

At dinner, his place was vacant.

"Late," she thought, but he did not appear, though she lingered long over her ice which was lemon-water, a thing she hated. She could see Mrs. Verney, talking, vivaciously moving her tiny hands, and Joceline listening to her, pale and inscrutable. Mrs. Bickersteth hardened her heart. She could hide things, that girl, like her wicked old mother. But, what *could* she have said? What was it?

The Verneys went out; Mrs. Bickersteth followed. The night was warm and the pair ahead joined the flâneurs on the terrace. Mme. de Mesnil came up with them and slipped a hand through her old friend's arm. Her mind, too, was busy. She had noticed the young man's absence at dinner. Had he received his congé? He was certainly beau garçon—after the English fashion—but a different type to the Verneys. Something in the way he moved. Was there, then, a chance for Jean? Should she ask her nephew down for the week-end and introduce him? The hotel charges were high and she had the frugal mind of the French. She decided to wait another day.

Mrs. Verney came in with her, was nabbed by "the General," and the party settled down to bridge, with the exception of Joceline, who wandered back to the terrace. There were no signs of Trench.

Mrs. Bickersteth could bear it no longer. She must put her pride in her pocket and find out how matters stood. She drew the Egyptian shawl round her and went in search of the girl.

She found her standing by the steps, listlessly gazing at the lake, barely visible in the darkness, for there was no moon to-night. Mrs. Bickersteth's voice made her start.

"My dear," the older woman began, "I hope you don't think me hard? But what you told me this afternoon was a surprise and—yes, a shock. Still, we won't talk of that. I want to help you, if I can."

"I know." The girl put out her hand and her eyes searched Mrs. Bickersteth's face. "But it's too late. Oliver's gone."

"Not left the hotel?" Mrs. Bickersteth, in her distress, clutched the delicate fingers she held.

"I didn't mean that. Mother has told him. I knew what had happened, during the drive, when he didn't come in to dinner. Besides, I expected it."

She spoke like a woman in a dream, whom nothing can surprise, and Mrs. Bickersteth's heart sank.

"But you're not going to stand it? You mustn't! It isn't fair to Oliver. You must explain everything. About your mother—those other men. I saw him for a moment this evening in a path on the hill. He had left Mrs. Verney at some Villa, and I thought he was on his way home. He looked—" She searched for an adequate expression and failed.

"I know," said the girl again.

"Then what do you intend to do?"

"Nothing. If he loves me, he'll come to me and tell me the truth."

"But supposing she had made him promise not to tell you? He wouldn't tell me." Mrs. Bickersteth was alarmed.

"Then—" Suddenly the girl's composure gave way. "Oh, I can't talk about it! Don't you see what I'm trying to do? Not to let mother know I've guessed. To give her"—she choked—"the power to insult me! Another failure—my fault! I can't bear it over again! If he loved me—I believed in him so!"

A tall form loomed up below and there came to them a man's voice:

"Is that you, Joceline? . . . I'm back, darling."

The girl gave a sharp cry, wrenched her hand free and was off, flying down the shallow steps into the darkness, to her lover.

"Oh, Oliver!"

Mrs. Bickersteth heard her, and the man's response: "Steady, dear!" before the shadows enfolded the pair.

CHAPTER XI

RS. BICKERSTETH slept badly, between excitement and "that ice," and was glad to accept Piper's suggestion that she should for once skip her bath and lie in bed an hour longer.

The morning sun streamed into her room, and all the world seemed young again.

"Of course they'll marry each other," she thought. "It's natural, and Nature knows best."

A sudden, queer doubt assailed her; a memory of that tense moment when the great rock had shown its teeth. Vaguely she felt that Nature at home—the rich, red soil where the gulls came wheeling, to alight and strut down the furrows, and the stone walls brought forth ferns—was not the same as Nature abroad. There were moments here when the Earth Mother crouched, hungry, and set a trap for frail mortals—when Pan laughed in the reeds!

This was so foreign to her belief in Nature being the Divine Handmaiden that she put it down to indigestion. A little soda and peppermint and these morbid fancies would pass! She dissolved a tabloid in her tooth-glass, stirring it with the silver spoon that bore the town arms of Llandudno. Strange how all these homely treasures made her feel safer across the Channel?

Adela had written that morning—dear Adela, so like herself, in a thinner binding, with modern type—and had counselled her to have patience with Elsie. Good advice,

her mother decided. There was nothing like Time for childish fancies.

"All the same," wrote Adela, "both the boys will have to work. Adrian quite agrees with me. If we get a Labour Government in, with Capital Levy, where shall we be? But let's hope it won't happen. I expect even if this occurs they'll find it not so easy to govern and agitate at the same time! Russia has been a good example of what Revolution does for a country. And England has always been level-headed."

Yes, Adela was comforting. She never met trouble half-way. There was a postscript:

"How do you like the book I sent you?"

Mrs. Bickersteth felt guilty.

"I'll get up and read it now," she decided. "I can sit on the balcony and there'll be nothing to distract me."

But there was. No sooner had she settled herself, a mushroom hat shading her eyes, and opened the novel at Chapter II, trying hard to remember the first, than she saw Joceline and Oliver come into sight near the tennis court.

"It's as if," she thought, "they'd been there all night! But how sweet she looks—alive again."

At the base of the steps, the pair parted. Joceline ran up alone and crossed to the lounge door—on her way, Mrs. Bickersteth decided, to meet Mrs. Verney after her bath. Trench stood, watching the girl's progress, half-hidden by the balustrade that curved outwards, to support a lower terra-cotta vase. Looking up at the hotel, he became aware of the interested spectator.

He waved to her and, mounting the steps, halted under the balcony.

"Good morning!" he cried "Are you coming down?

I was hoping I might see you."

"I'll come." She rose, a gigantic toadstool, broadstemmed, under the wide hat. "Shall I meet you on the terrace?"

"No," he said quickly. "It's rather public. What about that little room off the lounge? We should be quiet there. It's always empty in the mornings."

Mrs. Bickersteth, delighted, agreed; and there the two conspirators met.

Trench carefully closed the door.

"Now," he said, "I've got a great favour to ask. But I'd better tell you at the start that I'm off to Mont St. Michel to-morrow."

All the happiness died out of her face.

"No! Alone?" she added absurdly.

"Perhaps Sir Raphael may come with me—it was his idea—for the week-end. But the main point is, I want Mrs. Verney to hear of it."

"I see." Mrs. Bickersteth nodded sagely. "And I'm to tell her? I wish you'd sit down. You look so tired."

She noticed the drawn look about his mouth, as if he too had been cheated of sleep, and patted the hard sofa on which she had settled herself, her knitting bag by her side, from which protruded Adela's book.

"I'd rather stand," Trench replied. "I've not too much time. Have you made any plans for to-morrow?" She shook her head and he went on, a twinkle in his shadowed eyes, "Then will you ask me to drive to Domfront—I'll see about the car—and have lunch with me there?"

"To Domfront?" She stared at him. "Of course—if you want to. But if you're off to Mont St. Michel, how can you fit it in? The journey takes five hours."

"I know. That's why I'm dreadfully sorry, but I can't accept your kind invitation."

He laughed. Mrs. Bickersteth thought him mad.

"Is it a joke? I don't understand. Why must you go to Mont St. Michel? I wish you'd tell me what's happened?"

"I mustn't." He smiled gravely. "You'll have to trust me for the present. But I wanted you to invite me, so as to get the ground clear. Now, when you see Mrs. Verney, you won't have to tell fibs. I can't have you doing that for me. I'm asking such a lot already."

"And what is the favour?" She was intrigued.

"It's this. To go that drive to Domfront and take Joceline in my place. It's—frightfully important." There was no doubt of his gravity now. His voice was rough with some hidden emotion. "I want you to tell Mrs. Verney that you'd set your heart on this expedition and then I disappointed you. Give her the reason, my departure, and say you don't care to go alone, but have booked the car, and would she lend you Joceline?"

"You'll be there!" Mrs. Bickersteth jumped to conclusions. "To meet us when we arrive?"

"I shall not be there," said Trench firmly. "It's possible she may ask you this, so be quite certain on the point. I want Mrs. Verney to think that I've given the whole thing up as hopeless, am off to-morrow, in despair. I've a

notion that she'll be delighted to get Joceline out of the way, to avoid the chance of farewells. But you'll have to be very diplomatic. She's as shrewd as—as the devil!" he scoffed.

"I'll do my best." Mrs. Bickersteth was worried. She could see no point in this journey to Domfront. "What time should we have to start?"

"Would eleven o'clock be too early?"

"No, I can manage that."

"Good! I'll fix it up. The car will be at the door, waiting."

"But it's my car," she protested, guessing the young man's intention.

"Please let me?" He came nearer. "I'll be hurt if you refuse." There was pain in his voice.

She hesitated.

"You mean that—really?"

"I do. That's settled, then. You must drive the shortest way, through the Forêt d'Andaine, you and Joceline. I've a feeling you'll bring it off. I can't tell you more at present, but *everything* hinges on this trip. There's very serious trouble. You shall know it later on, if—" Trench checked himself.

"And yet you run away!" she cried. "It seems so—"
"Cowardly?" He supplied the missing word. "I have
to. It's part of my plan. I want Mrs. Verney to think
she's succeeded."

"But you're going to marry Joceline?"

"I am. In any case."

Again she could not divine his meaning. He went on, rather quickly:

"I may sail from St. Malo, direct, without returning here."

"You can't mean to California?"

"Lord, no! To England. It might simplify matters. I've been making inquiries. It's not easy to get married quickly in France. I should wait for Joceline in London—they're only staying two days in Paris. It would put her mother off the scent. But I'm not going to tell you any more. I want you to have an easy conscience." He looked at her with such real affection in the eyes so like her son's that the tears rose to her own. "You've a difficult task before you. But, if you can get Joceline to-morrow to Domfront, I'll bless you all my life."

"I will." Her head went up. She held out her hand to him. "You can trust me, Oliver." As he took it and pressed it in both his own, she added rather plaintively, "But I wish I knew everything."

"You shall. This isn't good-bye," he told her.

The full significance of the remark broke in on her, like a passing-bell. He was going away, out of her life.

"Oh, Oliver, I shall miss you!" She bit her lip, which was quivering.

"And I, you. But we'll meet in England. You'll come to our wedding, stand by us? Ah, don't!" For she was crying. He put an arm round her shoulders. "You've been more than—" he was going to say "a mother" but changed it chivalrously to—"more than a good friend to me. I couldn't have got on without you. May I?"

She nodded and he kissed her, on her smooth, firm cheek. Mrs. Bickersteth wiped her eyes.

"Silly of me—I'm getting old. Senile!" She tried to smile. "Now, let me be quite clear in my mind." She went through his directions, Oliver confirming them. "And I shall see you to-night and tell you the result," she concluded.

"No—I forgot that! Will you slip a note under my door? I shan't be coming in to dinner. I'm going to keep out of the way, since Mrs. Verney withholds her consent."

"But what did she *tell* you?" Mrs. Bickersteth, just in time, remembered her promise to Joceline. "I mean, she'd have to give you a reason?"

Curiosity was consuming her. She saw Trench stiffen. Into his eyes came an expression of anger and pain before he averted them.

"According to her, I'm utterly unsuitable." She guessed this to be an evasion and frowned. He added dryly, "Oh, she was very nice about it. The question of money did not crop up. She has her own private reasons for not wishing Joceline to marry. And that's all I must tell you." He glanced at his watch. "It's getting late. I mustn't be caught talking to you—she'd think we were conniving at something. Stay here a few minutes and see that the coast's clear. And thank you—thank you!" His voice vibrated. "I'm going to slip out this way." He opened the French window. "Please fasten it after me. Don't worry, but be careful. I shall see you before I leave—I promise you that. Ta-ta!"

He stepped down onto the terrace, turned sharply to the right, keeping close to the wall and, when he reached the

parapet, straddled it and let himself drop on to the higher ground below, where it sloped up to the main road.

Mrs. Bickersteth closed the window, with a sense of bitter disappointment. She was no wiser for all their talk. What had Mrs. Verney said? She herself had expected to find Trench in open rebellion, defying the parent, planning to run away with the girl. Instead of this, he was embarked on a fresh, mysterious adventure, under the cover of secrecy. Since Mrs. Verney knew now how matters stood between the pair, it could not be for Joceline's sake, to save her from the latter's displeasure. Why shouldn't everything be open? For, after all, at their ages, the mother's consent was superfluous. It was true she could withhold the money, for the few years remaining to her, but in the end it must be the girl's, and Trench could keep a wife without it—preferred to do so, as he had stated. He had his full share of pride. No, there was something more. He had talked of "serious trouble." What had Mrs. Verney revealed?

Mrs. Bickersteth returned to her old position on the sofa. Her eyes fell on her knitting bag. Many a time had she found that to occupy her hands induced clarity in her brain. She pulled out the yellow jumper which she was making for Elsie's birthday and counted the stitches on the needle. Then, placidly, she began to knit.

Click, click—she sorted out the tangled threads in her mind. Joceline had looked triumphant when she parted from her lover, but the man himself betrayed strain. He had gone through some serious ordeal. Mrs. Bickersteth could not forget his appearance on the hill by the Saut du Capucin and the expression on his face—"tortured,"

she found the word at last—as he came recklessly down the slope. What had happened during the drive, this test which he alone survived?

There must be some dark secret, unknown to Joceline, that was Mrs. Verney's final weapon to drive away the girl's admirers. Was Joceline—Mrs. Bickersteth started—could she be *illegitimate?* The germ of some forgotten novel began to work in her mind. With something dreadful about the father; a criminal, drunkard—or a convict?

"That's it!" She almost cried it aloud. "And of course no man would tell the girl. They couldn't betray Mrs. Verney."

The next moment her face fell. Would Mrs. Verney reveal such a sordid affair? She didn't look like a bad woman. (Mrs. Bickersteth used the adjective in its normal British sense, "bad" a synonym for "immoral.") She was always dignified, although she dressed in that silly fashion. But didn't this show a certain lightness, a want of stability at her age? Had she a "past"? Mrs. Bickersteth almost hoped that she had!

"She deserves it," she told her knitting confusedly. "I shouldn't wonder! And of course that's where the will comes in, Joceline no right to the Verney money, and Mrs. Verney always so *quiet* whilst her husband was alive. She wanted to live it down."

A faint sound broke through her romance. She looked up. The door was opening, cautiously, a few inches. For a moment, watchful, she saw a pair of bright, dark eyes and the point of a duffle hood. Then the door was drawn to and the handle turned; the latch clicked into place.

Mrs. Bickersteth dropped a stitch.

"Just like a scene in a play," she thought, with the thrill that always ran through her when the curtain drew up. For the simple at heart have this advantage: a palate for pleasure as clean as a child's.

Mrs. Verney, spying on her? No, on the young people! Joceline must have missed her mother when she alighted from the bus. Or—Mrs. Bickersteth's instinct helped her; it was far sounder than her reason—Mrs. Verney had made some excuse to her daughter and come in search of Oliver, expecting, for some unknown reason, to find the young man hiding here. She was frightened! He hadn't taken the news in the same way as those other men. His love for the girl was not that attraction of the flesh which so often leads to marriage, but the rarer sort, virile, yet holding the deep needs of the spirit.

Oliver, Mrs. Bickersteth thought, was a man who would sacrifice all hope of paternity and marry a consumptive woman to nurse her tenderly till her death.

Off she went, at a tangent. Could the girl be consumptive, after all, and unaware of the fact? But Piper had sturdily refuted this notion, conveyed to her earlier. She had told Mrs. Bickersteth that Miss Verney wasn't "the right colour"; she never showed "that arctic flush!"

Smiling at the memory, the elderly lady folded her knitting and went to the door to peer through a crack. All was safe. She emerged, and sailed forth into the sunshine to occupy her favourite seat. Once more, she opened Adela's book, sighed, and settled down to her task.

"I shall never like it," she decided. "Somehow, the story doesn't *hold* one."

After a little she looked up at the smiling sky and the woods. Gently she closed the volume. Peace. She basked in the warm silence.

A sparrow ventured close to her, found a shallow depression where sand had silted and began an energetic dust-bath. Mrs. Bickersteth watched the fluttering wings. Not one feather could fall—she remembered the verse, a favourite one from her childhood. Life was secure, held in His hand. . . . It would all come right for those dear, young people.

At lunch it was Joceline who talked and Mrs. Verney who listened.

The old lady looked ill and peevish. Occasionally her dark eyes would travel to the empty table in the corner of the screen. Had Trench departed? She fervently hoped so. She had never felt less sure of a man. At least, this is what Mrs. Bickersteth shrewdly divined in those covert glances.

Joceline seemed her normal self, but the watcher's instinct, on the alert, discovered the signs of repressed excitement. Once the girl caught her eyes and read a subtle warning in them. She relapsed into silence, the old mask on her face. Mrs. Verney seemed to revive when Joceline, absent-mindedly, helped herself twice to salt.

"Dreaming?" She smiled at her daughter. "I think this afternoon we'll wander down into the town and buy that frock I spoke about and then forgot! Your careless old mother."

"But I don't need it." Joceline was troubled.

"Not here, perhaps, but in the summer. We're only

staying two nights in Paris. We shan't have much time for shopping."

The girl remembered Oliver's caution: to behave as if nothing had occurred and fall in with plans for the future.

"But we'll go and see Mary? At least I hope to. She always looks forward to my visits."

"You're very fond of her?"

"She's my best friend," said Joceline simply.

"And a nun." Mrs. Verney's lips twitched. "You ought to have been a Catholic."

Joceline glanced up, surprised. Was her mother in earnest, or mocking? Had she ever regretted the change of religion necessary to her marriage? For her husband had been firm on this point. The Squire's wife must uphold the orthodox creed of the country. Whenever they were staying in France, Mrs. Verney willingly attended the various Catholic services. Yet in Norfolk, Joceline remembered, she was inclined to frame excuses and send her daughter in her place to sit in the dark, old pew. But always with the careful warning: "If you see the Vicar's wife, tell her that I'm not well to-day and thought it prudent to stay indoors."

So what was the meaning of this remark, lightly spoken across the table? Joceline tried an experiment:

"I might become a Catholic yet, and return one day to the Convent."

Mrs. Verney looked amused.

"Oh, no, you wouldn't. You're too Conservative, like your father! The Verneys have done the same things, loved and worshipped, married and hunted, in the same

way for centuries. And you're a Verney—in looks and brain. You don't take after me. No, I can't see you a Catholic—and certainly not a nun!" She gave her soft, brittle laugh. "You like men's society. And why not?" She shrugged her shoulders. "Though as to being Conservative, if it comes to that, all your ancestors in the early times were good Catholics. You were called after one: Josceline de Verneuil."

"The Crusader on the tomb in the church?" This was news to the girl. "I thought it was after my grand-father?"

"It comes to the same thing." Mrs. Verney finished her wine. "There has always been a Jocelyn Verney in the elder branch of the family. We had no son and, as you were born late in marriage"—she smiled—"well, we did the best we could!"

"I wish you'd kept the 'S' in my name. Why didn't you?" her daughter asked. "I've always loved old Josceline with his crossed legs and the hound at his feet."

"Your father thought 'Joceline' more English. The same reason probably, why the name under Cromwell got changed to Verney. He disliked a Norman flavour. Or anything foreign, in fact. He always tried"—she smiled subtly—"to eradicate this taint in me and my mother's influence. Do you remember your grandmother, Joceline?"

"Just! Her stick with an ivory handle, and the little thimble-case and scissors on her gold chatelaine. I think I was rather afraid of her!"

Mrs. Verney nodded.

"She was very strict with young people. Especially

after my father died and we went back to live in France. I remember that your Aunt Thérèse and I were never allowed to be alone with a man—or even alone outside the park. How would you have liked that?" She darted a smiling, malicious glance across the table. Joceline was silent. "But I've been a more indulgent mother." Her eyes wandered. "Here comes Mrs. Bickersteth. She looks lonely to-day, without her young man! I suppose he's gone on some expedition." She paused.

"Probably," said Joceline calmly.

"Then, shall we ask her to join us at coffee? Outside. It would be kind, I think."

Mrs. Bickersteth, all sails set, came to anchor at Mrs. Verney's signal. She accepted the invitation, and the trio went out into the air. Her chair faced Joceline's, with Mrs. Verney in between them. It was early yet and they had the corner to themselves, save for "the French boy with legs," as Mrs. Bickersteth christened him, who was quarrelling with his youngest sister. She wore a bright tartan frock and a hat covered with a mixture of cornflowers, dandelion puffs and poppies that formed a brilliant note on the terrace. Black-haired, red-lipped, her sallow face lit up with anger, she darted forward suddenly and slapped the teasing boy on the cheek. He howled—took her by the shoulders and shook her, without mercy.

Mrs. Verney interposed; fluently, in their own tongue. Her air of authority frightened the pair, who fell apart to stare at her.

The boy regained his aplomb the first and started a voluble explanation. Mrs. Verney promptly checked him, but accepted his apology as he raised his hat with the air of a

man. His eyes slipped to Joceline's face. For the girl looked beautiful to-day.

"And to Mademoiselle," he added, bowing. "But my sister is very young."

Mrs. Bickersteth smiled—then frowned.

"A horrid little boy," she said, as the pair wandered off. "I can't stand his precocious manner."

Mrs. Verney nodded, smiling.

"He is my daughter's devoted admirer. Yesterday he brought her flowers. With short, wet stalks, which looked suspicious! I don't think they were *bought*, as they matched the ones on our table."

Joceline laughed.

At the rare, youthful sound, Mrs. Verney's face changed.

"You shouldn't encourage these young men!"

It had all the appearance of a joke, but the girl understood.

"You needn't be afraid," she responded. "I should never dream of marrying a Frenchman. They don't seem to me sincere." It was two-edged. She added, smiling, "Not even Pierre. I'm proof against his fascinations."

"Even his legs!" Mrs. Verney saw her chance at last. "And where is *your* admirer gone?" she asked Mrs. Bickersteth, when the waiter had laid down the coffee. "I mean Mr. Trench. Sugar?"

"Please—one lump. Oliver is off for a final tramp with Sir Raphael Thring." She took the cup from her hostess's hand. "They leave for Mont St. Michel to-morrow. I'm sorry. I shall miss him."

"Indeed?" Mrs. Verney stirred her coffee. Under her

lashes, darkened with care, she was watching Joceline. "It's rather sudden, isn't it?"

"I believe it was Sir Raphael's idea. He wants to see the Mount"—Mrs. Bickersteth was improvising—"and his time is limited. But it's very annoying for me. It's upset all my plans to-morrow."

She waited, hoping and fearing, but Mrs. Verney picked up the ball.

"You were going somewhere together?"

"To Domfront. I'd so looked forward to it—ordered the car and everything! We were going there to lunch, to have plenty of time to see the place. It's really too provoking of him!" She took a sip of the hot coffee and resumed in her slow, pleasant voice, "I tried to get Lady Thring, when I met them this morning"—the colour warmed in her cheek. That was what Elsie called "a corker!" Still, in such a good cause—"but she thought it would be too tiring, and I don't know any one else here."

Her breath failed her and she paused. Afterwards she told Piper that this was the "goodness of Providence." For Mrs. Verney said calmly:

"Would you like to take Joceline?"

Mrs. Bickersteth showed her surprise, and covered it cleverly.

"But can you spare her? I should love it! That is"—she turned her eyes to the girl—"if you'd like to come, my dear?"

Joceline hesitated. "I should, only"—she glanced at her parent—"how would you dress after your bath?"

Mrs. Verney smiled. She had noticed the girl's reluctance.

"That's simple. Lady Carnedin would lend me Marie. You go and enjoy yourself."

"Or won't you let Piper help you?" Mrs. Bickersteth put in.

"Better still! I like your old maid. Yes, it can all be arranged, and we can't have you motoring alone. At what hour do you start?"

"At eleven. Would that be too early?"

"Not at all." Mrs. Verney seemed to be thinking. "I suppose then, that Mr. Trench is leaving by the morning train?"

Mrs. Bickersteth nodded.

"Tiresome boy! Still, now I'm to have Joceline with me, I can afford to forgive him." She finished her coffee, resisting the sharp temptation to look at the girl and a little puzzled by her silence.

Surely she must know Oliver's plans? If so, she acted well. Mrs. Verney would see to it that there was no time for a lover's parting. Yet Trench had promised to say good-bye to his old friend before he left. Mrs. Bickersteth was so afraid of betraying her secret thoughts that she rose from the table, with the excuse of correspondence.

"You won't fail me?" she said to Joceline. "I expect you've often been there before? You must tell me all about Domfront."

"I will," the girl responded limply. "It's very kind of you to ask me."

Mrs. Bickersteth went upstairs, puzzled.

She wrote a little line to Trench and gave Piper her instructions.

"Whatever you do, don't let them see you going down his passage," she said.

"I'd best do it now whilst they're on the terrace," Piper decided. "It would be safer. I rather wish, ma'am" her voice was acid—"that you'd not offered me to dress her. I don't understand powders and paints."

She wore an air of outraged virtue, and Mrs. Bickersteth looked troubled.

"It's to help Mr. Trench," she suggested, and saw Piper's face clear.

"Well, I'll do my best, ma'am, I'm sure."

Cautiously, she performed her errand. The valet de chambre had been sweeping the floor and had gone out, leaving the door ajar. Piper, eyes narrowed, looked behind her. No one in sight! She slipped through the opening and placed the note on the dressing-table. As she was leaving the narrow room, which was in the far wing, she saw, thrown upon the bed, a pair of crumpled woollen socks. She gathered them up and, with the skill born of practice, ran her fingers into the toes. Just as she thought—two big holes! Here was her opportunity. Rolling them into a tight ball she thrust them under her left arm-pit and was out of the room, before the valet, surly, because he was late that day, rounded the sharp corner.

CHAPTER XII

HE car bearing the two ladies drove slowly through the town, for Bagnoles was full of life this morning, gay sunshades and summer frocks marking the way to the Tennis Club where a Tournament had commenced. But soon they left the Villas behind them and plunged into the cool forest.

Mrs. Bickersteth glanced at the girl by her side, tranquil, lost in dreams, her eyes fixed on the long white road where the shadows lay like gauze, strewn with a leafy pattern.

What thoughts were passing through her mind and why were they both going to Domfront? She could not solve the mystery and she felt that Joceline should help her.

"Now, my dear"—she broke the silence determinedly—"I think you might tell me everything. I've been very patient, haven't I?"

Joceline started and turned her head. Under the narrow brim of the hat that matched the colour of her eyes and seemed to accentuate their depths, she returned Mrs. Bickersteth's glance with affection.

"You've been ever so kind. I'll tell you all I know, but it doesn't amount to much. I'm simply obeying Oliver's wishes."

"You mean to say that he hasn't told you the reason

for this expedition?" Mrs. Bickersteth felt cheated. "That you haven't learnt what your mother said?"

Joceline nodded.

"He won't tell me. Not yet. Except that she withholds her consent. But of course I expected that."

"And he's off to-day to Mont St. Michel? I never heard anything so mad!" Mrs. Bickersteth sounded injured. "What is the meaning of it all?"

"I can only guess," said Joceline. "I think mother has told him something, but Oliver simply won't believe it. Still, he wants her to think she's succeeded, and that's why he's going away. But I doubt if it's to Mont St. Michel. It's somewhere nearer, where we can meet. We meant to have a talk this morning, but mother didn't go to her bath and she kept me with her all the time. So I'm altogether in the dark. Oliver wouldn't leave Bagnoles without sending me a line. Yet, last night he begged me not to worry, but leave everything in his hands. Above all, to get to Domfront. I was hoping you could enlighten me?"

"I call it exasperating!" Mrs. Bickersteth's nose was in the air, pronouncedly Roman. "He really might trust us."

"Oh, it isn't that," said the girl quickly. "It's for our sakes, in case mother should ask questions. But I don't feel quite happy about it. Why can't we tell her openly that we mean to be married anyhow?"

"Exactly." The word was crisp.

Mrs. Bickersteth leaned back and attacked the problem anew. It was silent in the forest, save for the faint drone of the engine, the occasional note of a bird, or the murmur of one of the little brooks that drained what had been unhealthy marshlands. She dodged, to avoid a dragon-fly with brilliant iridescent wings that was caught in the wind raised by the car and nearly driven into her face.

"I can't bear them," she told Joceline. "Ever since the day of my childhood when my brother caught one, chloroformed it, cut off its head to make sure it was dead, and pinned it on to a cork for me. And when the chloroform wore off it wriggled free and flew away—with the pin in its body!"

"Without a head?" Joceline shuddered.

Mrs. Bickersteth nodded solemnly.

"Horrible! I can see it still."

They relapsed into silence. The subtle influence of the trees, so full of age and secret knowledge, induced a gentle melancholy. Here and there, the sunshine drifted, in long rays where the dust motes glittered, suggesting the streamers that find their way through dim windows in a cathedral. The broad boles on either side might have been pillars, supporting the roof, formed of branches that were curved in an arch like ancient groins.

Joceline absently studied them.

"If only I knew," she murmured.

There was trouble in her sapphire eyes, and Mrs. Bickersteth asked gently:

"Knew what, my dear?"

"If I'm doing right. It's so difficult to see clearly. When I'm with Oliver it all seems natural. But at other times, when I think of mother, old and alone, and"—she caught her breath—"California's so far away!"

"But you told me she wouldn't be alone," came in the slow, comforting voice. "That your Aunt Thérèse would live with her and be thankful for a home, since she lost hers in the War. Your unmarried cousin too, and that she would look after your mother."

"Not as I do," Joceline protested. "In the French way; very efficient, but, somehow, hard under the surface. That's Aunt Thérèse, quite charming, but, for all that, a martinet. And then, there would be the question of money, and mother would expect them to help. The French are too frugal to be generous—I've learnt that at Mentone. My father's nation both give and take with a better grace. They're not so quick, nor such brilliant company, but there's something sound in Anglo-Saxons."

"That's true." Mrs. Bickersteth looked thoughtful. "You think your mother will miss you badly. But we must look at both sides of the case. I can't believe that it's right for you to sacrifice yourself again. You must remember Oliver. He's stood the test like a man. He loves you and he deserves his reward. I wonder what your mother told him?"

"Ah, if I only knew that!" Joceline straightened her drooping shoulders. "If it's anything cruel or untrue, then I shall have no more scruples. I believe it must be, from Oliver's face, whenever I refer to it. But what can she say? He's promised to tell me. I hoped it would be this morning. But mother prevented that. Oh!" She covered her eyes with her hand.

For a fast car had swung past them, going in the same direction, and a cloud of dust poured back, gritty and blinding, thick as smoke.

"Abominable!" Mrs. Bickersteth gasped. "They've no business to go at that pace. She hunted for her hand-kerchief, blinking. "That's the way accidents happen, but our driver seems a cautious man."

Their own car was slowing down. Ahead of them was an open space, the junction of eight roads, known as the Carrefour de l'Étoile and flanked by a pair of Foresters' lodges. It was a famous rendezvous for picnics and hunting parties, for the woods held all manner of game, including stag and wild boar.

The rond point was smothered in dust, the result of the racer passing through it. As it cleared, the pair in its wake could see two figures drawn up by the signpost. One of them stepped into the road and, raising his stick on high, waved it.

"It's Oliver!" cried Joceline.

"No?" Mrs. Bickersteth leaned forward. "So it is!" A thrill ran through her. "I believe that's Sir Raphael with him. Then they haven't gone to Mont St. Michel!" She poked the driver in the back with the end of her sunshade. "Haltez!" she told him excitedly.

He turned on the brakes and the car stopped as Trench came up, his face alight with secret mischief.

"Good morning!" He shook Mrs. Bickersteth's hand, but his eyes were for Joceline. "I wonder if you would give us a lift? We're on our way to Domfront."

"You bad boy!" Mrs. Bickersteth chuckled. "And you told me— Get in! Ah, here's Sir Raphael. How do you do? You remember Miss Verney?"

"As if I could possibly forget her," Thring responded gallantly. "Are you sure we shan't be crowding you?"

He followed Trench into the car, at his old friend's hearty invitation. "That young man's done me out of a tramp," he informed her, "but I've planned my revenge. I'm going to give you all lunch at Domfront. I won't allow him to play host. It's no good protesting"—his dark eyes twinkled—"as I ordered it by telephone. When we missed that train to Mont St. Michel!" He laughed outright at Mrs. Bickersteth's expression. "We might as well get out of this dust? *En avant!*" he ordered the chauffeur.

"Then you were going? Without even wishing me goodbye." She looked reproachfully at Trench, whose eyes were fixed on her companion, a silent message passing between them.

"Well, I got as far as the station," he told her. "And then Sir Raphael rescued me, and we dropped my baggage at his hotel before we drove on here to meet you. He's found me a room for the night, but officially I've left Bagnoles. You understand?"

"I'm not dense!" Mrs. Bickersteth beamed at him.

She decided that it had all been planned. He had told her she would see him again. But she wondered what lay behind it. Why was it necessary to delude every one?

Sir Raphael filled the pause that followed.

"Now, Miss Verney, you know this place. Give us the history of Domfront. My mind is a blank concerning it. Does it make pillow lace, or indulge in civil wars? Or simply sit in the sunshine and drink, without getting intoxicated—the crowning virtue of the French?"

Joceline smiled.

"That's its present occupation, I fancy. But, in the past, its rôle was war. Endless wars round the fortress.

Richard Cœur de Lion stayed there, on his way to the Crusades, and it's been besieged by William the Conqueror and by English troops centuries later. But its greatest exploit in history was the stand made by the Huguenots under the Comte de Montgomery. This was after the Massacre of St. Bartholomew."

She paused, for Sir Raphael's eyes had narrowed.

He nodded encouragingly.

"Please go on with the story."

Mrs. Bickersteth glanced at Trench. He was grave now, watching the pair. In repose, his face betrayed strain; his lips were tightly pressed together.

"I'm not quite sure about my numbers," Joceline confessed, "but I believe that Montgomery held the citadel with 150 men, all told. Matignon's army attacked in force, with siege guns, 5,000 strong. At last there were only forty left of Montgomery's gallant band, but still they continued to hold Domfront. That was the second morning." A faint colour warmed her cheeks. She seemed lost in the past. "They knelt down and the minister blessed them before they went to their places at dawn. At last all were wounded or slain but fourteen, and they had run out of powder. The enemy poured in through a breach in the walls, and they were forced to surrender."

"What an epic—fourteen against five thousand? Though perhaps that has been exaggerated. All for the sake of a split in creeds!" Sir Raphael shrugged his shoulder. "But men will do great things for religion. Why?" He smiled at the girl.

"Perhaps"—her eyes were full of dreams—"because it

appeals to the spirit. It isn't politics, or loot. The reason for so many wars."

"The spirit?" Sir Raphael mused. "I suppose you mean for reward hereafter?"

She caught him up, resenting his tone, faintly amused and cynical:

"But wouldn't that be politics? No"—she faced the issue bravely—"it's something deeper than that. As deep as the sense of right and wrong."

"But supposing you were a Catholic, you'd say that Montgomery deserved it—that God had punished a heretic?"

"Possibly." She was frowning.

"Then how do you discriminate between right and wrong in this case?" he asked her.

"I don't." She looked up, her eyes sparkling, warmed by the argument. "I think all war is wrong. Certainly in a civilized age. But Montgomery saw it as his *duty*, and he fought against hopeless odds. That's fine—that's being a man!" she cried.

"I quite agree. With the *sentiment*." Sir Raphael watched her admiringly. "Still nowadays it would be called a general sacrificing his troops deliberately for his own renown."

"You forget," said the girl swiftly, "that they were voluntary soldiers. He was a hero, leading a willing band of martyrs!"

"Come, come!" Mrs. Bickersteth intervened, with her mistrust of controversy. "Arguments lead nowhere. I never will allow them at home, especially on religion. They only make people cross."

"I give in." Sir Raphael smiled. "Still it's tempting when one finds an opponent worthy of one's steel. Which suggests that war is instinctive in mankind, the secret flaw in the League of Nations. My only hope is that when the affairs of the world are settled by arbitration the dispute will go the same way as most Commissions—peter out from sheer boredom! Talking of martyrs," he went on blandly, "reminds me of an incident at our hotel the other day. I was talking to a French lady who apparently specialized in martyrs. She had lent me a book on the subject; a rather amazing document which seemed to advance the theory that the majority had been French! I pointed out to her that, racially, most of the early martyrs were Jews. I never saw any one so indignant!" He laughed at the memory. "She was très dévote and an ardent anti-Dreyfusarde."

"Dear me!" Mrs. Bickersteth looked startled. "I always thought of them as English. Anyhow, St. George was. Oh, look! What a view!"

They had emerged from the forest onto a level plateau. Below them stretched mile upon mile of fertile country dotted by hamlets, each with its church tower, or spire, pointing up to the blue heaven. The sun had turned the river to silver, as it flowed towards the deep ravine in the great rock guarding Domfront. Soon they could see the grey mass of the citadel rise before them, with its immense broken walls, its fortified turrets and air of strength.

"Nous voilà!" Sir Raphael rubbed his hands glee-fully against each other. "I'm feeling uncommonly like lunch. But it's early yet. What does one visit first?" he enquired of Joceline.

"The Dungeon, I think—as an hors d'œuvre!"

"Ah, you're hungry too?"

"I am," she confessed gaily.

The movement through the honeyed air and the sense of her lover's presence had brought all her youth to the surface. But she wished he had been her *vis-à-vis*, instead of Sir Raphael.

Mrs. Bickersteth, too, was vexed by this. Why was Oliver so silent? He allowed the older man to monopolize the girl. She had long ago decided that Trench had only included the former in order to make the numbers even. Sir Raphael was destined to be her companion whilst the young people wandered off.

"I shall see to that when we get there," she thought. "These selfish old married men! They can't keep away from a pretty girl."

But her kindly plans were foredoomed.

Domfront seized them, like an ogre swallowing a toothsome morsel. On their right, lay the Rue des Fossés-Plissons, where the houses are built into the wall, with tattered turrets surviving the ages and, before them, rose the twin towers between which the great gates of the citadel had been wont to hang.

Now they crawled up the Grande Rue, so narrow that there was barely room for the other slow procession to pass them, steep alleys on either hand, everywhere traces of the past, gaps formed by cannon-balls where trees had sprouted, finding a foot-hold, blackened walls with their eyeless sockets through which the arrows had poured forth. Domfront, sitting in the sunshine, grouped about its cafés, drinking, still held an air of being on guard.

Mrs. Bickersteth peered about her, delighted. This was "foreign"! Such narrow streets, with oxen dragging the heavy carts, the women bare-headed, and the men in those lovely blue corduroys. She gave Domfront her patronage audibly:

"Look at the funny little dogs, clipped like poodles! Aren't they quaint? And what a lovely smell of coffee!"

"The carbolic of France," Thring murmured. "Yes, we should be grateful for it." He looked at Joceline wickedly and the girl laughed, for a ranker odour rose from the hot streets, of rotting garbage, garlic, and houses ill-drained and unventilated. "Isn't it curious," he asked her, "that a people so quick, so intelligent, should yet be mediæval in some of their habits? It's partly poverty, of course, and an inverted sense of thrift. They would sooner save money than save health."

At last they came to the ruined *Donjon* of the Dukes of Normandy, frowning down on the Public Gardens, the *doyen* of the fourteen towers which still resist the hand of Time. They decided to send the car to the garage and walk the remainder of the way. Mrs. Bickersteth left the men to arrange this and moved forward with Joceline, a hand slipped through the girl's arm.

"Weren't you surprised," she said, "to see Oliver in the forest? Or had he given you a hint?"

"No, I could hardly believe my eyes. Still, I had a feeling he'd be at Domfront. I've been longing to question him, but I didn't like to, before your friend."

"Exactly! I wish we had Oliver to ourselves. But I'll manage—you leave things to me."

It was not so easy as she thought. They wandered round the broken walls, in a compact group, until Mrs. Bickersteth, irritated, sank down on a bench.

"I can't go any farther," she panted. "But don't you young people wait for me. Sir Raphael will see me to the hotel. What time is lunch?" she asked him.

He looked at his watch.

"Half an hour yet. Supposing—" He glanced at Trench.

But Trench had already settled himself by Mrs. Bickersteth's side.

"I'm going to stay with you," he announced. "Alone!" He smiled at Joceline and gave her a little nod.

The girl, puzzled, turned to Thring.

"A broad hint! Shall we take it?"

"By all means. I'm still cramped from the drive. I suggest, too, that we find some place where we can get an *apéritif*. I'm sure your throat's full of dust? Mine is—so, come along!"

"But, Oliver, you go too." Mrs. Bickersteth struggled up. "Or I could walk as far as—" She stopped, for he had laid a hand on her arm.

"I want to have a chat with you."

She sank down, half-mollified, but watched the pair walk briskly away, her expression still indignant.

"I wish you hadn't brought him," she cried. "He's spoiling everything!"

"He isn't." Trench spoke earnestly. "I told him I wanted you to myself as soon as we reached Domfront. And I do." He smiled at her, with affection. "We haven't so much longer together."

"You mean you're still going away?" She forgot Sir Raphael's "selfishness." "Oh, do tell me what you've planned?"

"It depends," he answered, "on to-night. I must have a long talk with Joceline. It will be quite easy now, as her mother thinks I've left the place. Of course we shan't return there with you. You must drop us in the forest. I don't want any one to know. The chauffeur won't tell. I've squared him already."

"Then you never meant to go to the Mount? I guessed as much!" She was triumphant. "And Sir Raphael?"

"We planned it together. I've told him—everything." He spoke rather jerkily. "You can't guess how good he's been. I never thought he'd prove such a friend. I owe you that, as well."

"My dear boy." She was touched. "But I wish I could understand. It's all right between you two? You're going to marry Joceline?"

"You can bet your life on that." He got up as a clock struck the quarter. "Hadn't we better make a move? No good walking fast this weather. Will you have an arm?" He offered his left one. Mrs. Bickersteth took it gratefully. It brought back old times with Dicky, for her son had been devoted to her. "This reminds me of our first walk together," Trench said, as they crossed the road. "The night you took me to the dance. It seems years ago now."

She looked up at him.

"You're not happy?"

"I'm anxious," he confessed. "But I think it's going to come right. I've a good deal on my mind."

"Is it something that Mrs. Verney said? If so, don't believe her."

That was not betraying a confidence, but just a kindly hint, she decided.

"I don't, but I'm going to—" He checked himself. "Help me with Joceline? And I want this to be a cheery lunch. Sir Raphael has been so kind, and he's standing treat to-day."

There was no doubt about the lunch being a success, thanks to the host. Thanks, too, to the girl he admired. The pair had returned in the best of spirits from their adventures in the town. These had included a descent on the bar of a little inn where Sir Raphael had won the confidence of the proprietor and had mixed two apéritifs after his own formula. A potent one, according to Joceline!

Not content with this, he insisted on filling up the glasses continually during the lengthy meal.

"It will go to my head," Joceline protested, when she realized what he was doing. "I generally drink water."

"This won't hurt you," Sir Raphael assured her. "And you told me it was the occupation of the citizens of Domfront."

"But not to get intoxicated," she reminded him gaily. "It's delicious, all the same." She lifted her glass. "Ta santé!" She smiled at Trench, the love-light in her eyes.

At that moment, Sir Raphael, leaning sideways to minister to the older guest, clumsily let the bottle slip. It crashed down on the floor and broke.

"Oh!" cried Mrs. Bickersteth.

Joceline never turned a hair. She was laughing.

"That's a punishment! Domfront, keeping you in order."

"Then we'll have another bottle." He signalled to the waiter. "Just to show we're not frightened."

"Oh, no! We can't drink it." Mrs. Bickersteth was shocked. "I won't let you be so extravagant."

But the host had his way.

"Well, only a little." Mrs. Bickersteth capitulated. It was difficult to refuse the wine under the circumstances.

Trench was the only abstemious one. He sat, rather silent, listening to the conversation, which was like a brilliant overture with an occasional heavy chord supplied by Mrs. Bickersteth. He had never seen Joceline in such spirits. Sir Raphael seemed to spur her on, himself so fluent and cynical. She was witty and provocative, amazingly young, gay when challenged, swift and sure in her repartee.

Mrs. Bickersteth listened, astonished.

"Why, she's clever," she thought, "and I never guessed it! So different, away from her mother. But I hope she won't go too far. I don't think Oliver quite likes it. Oh, dear, he's ordering liqueurs now! Not for me," she said firmly, "I've had quite enough to drink." And she looked at Joceline—a look that Elsie knew well.

"No, thanks," said the girl. "Only coffee. I love coffee!"

"I'll toss you whether you have it or not?" Sir Raphael chuckled, and drew out a coin. "You're too good a sportsman to refuse."

He spun.

"Heads!" cried Joceline, and lost. She glanced at Trench with a little grimace. "You drink it for me?"

"Oh, no—fair play!" Sir Raphael, laughing, gave the order. "I'll let you off with a very small one and so old that you'll think it's milk!"

"Come, come!" Mrs. Bickersteth rose, majestic, her broad face flushed. "A joke's a joke, but I don't approve. Not if Joceline doesn't want it."

"What about having coffee outside?" Sir Raphael moved to the door. "I'll go and see if it's possible. It's very hot in here."

He went out. Mrs. Bickersteth drifted to the window, her back turned to the lovers, who were standing together near the table.

"Happy?" Oliver whispered.

He glanced quickly down the empty room, for by now the other guests had departed, and laid a hand on the girl's shoulder.

"Always—with you." Her hands went up impulsively and drew his head down to hers. "I love you so—I love you so!"

He could hardly catch the words, but he kissed her stealthily and felt her lips cling to his.

"Later," he whispered tenderly. "I shall see you tonight. As soon as you can, come down to the garden gate. You'll find me just beyond it."

Mrs. Bickersteth, fully aware of what was going on behind her, had her face glued to the panes. She was glad they had the chance at last! If only she could slip out. . . .

She sidled to the door. It was ajar. As she opened it wider, she came face to face with her host.

"Oh!" She recoiled.

"I was just coming in," he explained suavely. "But since you're ready—" He stood back.

Mrs. Bickersteth sailed past him, the red flag flying in her cheeks. She had not the faintest doubt! He had been spying on his guests. She wished she had never come to Domfront. First, he had carried off the girl—whatever Oliver might say—given her some sort of cocktail, and then too much wine at lunch. If she took that cognac, she'd be ill—a nice end to the adventure! No wonder Oliver looked unhappy. A sudden luminous notion struck her. *Drink!* There was drink in the family. Sir Raphael had been testing her. Then he wasn't a—what was the word? Her head was really quite muddled. She made a shot at it—"a Satire"! He wanted to see how much she could stand and the effect on her.

She jumped, for he spoke close behind her.

"Not much of a garden, but it will serve. Anyhow, there's a breath of air, and it's too dusty in the front. I'll tell the waiter to bring some chairs."

Sir Raphael had a way of being obeyed on the spot. Soon Mrs. Bickersteth was seated under a primitive pergola, the waiter dusting the iron table. He would have dusted the vine too, had Sir Raphael given the order! He spread a checked cloth evenly and departed for the coffee.

From the house came Trench and Joceline. She had taken off her hat. Her hair shone like corn in the sun-

shine; there was rich colour in her lips and an air of conquest about her, new to her, and of happiness. Her hand was slipped through her lover's arm, and he was smiling at some jest.

"What a picture," murmured Sir Raphael. "It almost makes me believe in love. That girl's devoted to him." He read Mrs. Bickersteth's thoughts. "At the moment, she doesn't care if she shows it. How I envy them their youth!"

He returned to the subject later as they drank their coffee in the shade.

"If I were your age," he said to Trench, "I know where I'd go for a honeymoon."

"I can guess!" Joceline looked up, smiling. "To that little inn we found this morning. Do tell them all about it."

Sir Raphael described the place, clinging to the ancient wall, built from stones detached from the ruins, weather-beaten yet spotlessly clean, thanks to the busy patronne. It possessed a straggling garden, and a view of the wide prospect below that embraced twelve communes.

"Immense! It makes you hold your breath. And the whole place has an air of romance and mystery, of being forgotten by the world. But that's not all." He smiled at his audience. "The name is so wonderful. It fits it like a leaf to a rose. You'll never divine it, so I'll tell you. It's called the 'Hôtel Champsecret.'"

"No?" Trench, too, was dreaming. "Our secret orchard. That's strange."

Joceline's hand stole out and found his under the rough cloth.

Mrs. Bickersteth nodded placidly. She was drowsy from the heat and lunch.

"Here's to them"—Sir Raphael raised his glass, approving the colour of the cognac—"to the hosts of lovers that have been and will come to the *Champsecret*. To dream and to know—Paradise!"

He drank, his eyes, liquid and compelling, on Joceline. Absently, she did the same.

"Oh! . . . It's stronger than I thought." She put up her hand to her throat and laughed. "You mustn't let me take too much. *In vino veritas!*"

Mrs. Bickersteth's eyes, half-closed, were fixed drowsily on Trench. She caught a quick glance that passed between him and his host as the girl looked down at the glass in her hand. Instantly, she was on the alert.

"You'd survive the test," Sir Raphael assured her. In his voice was a note of gravity. "Is that a Judas tree there?" He pointed across the garden.

The older woman ignored the remark. She had seen Trench gulp hard. For a moment, his hand on the table was clenched and he went pale under the tan. Then he tossed off his liqueur.

That proved it, the onlooker decided. Her inspiration had been a true one. Living in America, he would be especially scared by drink! And a serious man would think of his children—that terrible taint in the blood. Yet how could Sir Raphael be sure? Anyhow, he seemed satisfied. If all were well, it was pleasanter than her earlier theory, that of illegitimacy. Rather regretfully she abandoned the "convict father" and became aware that Joceline was speaking.

"The name doesn't suit it. The flower's so lovely! I remember the first Judas tree I saw was at Avignon, years ago when we broke our journey there, going to the Riviera. I got up at six the next morning to go and dance on the bridge." She began to sing, under her breath:

"'Sur le pont d'Avignon
On y danse a la ronde . . .'

I'd rather like to dance now! I do feel so happy to-day." She looked at Trench. "I feel free—as if I'd escaped from that dungeon!"

"And so you have." His voice was husky. "And no one shall ever find you again. We'll hide you at the Champsecret."

Sir Raphael smiled and glanced at his watch.

"Do you know that it's nearly half-past three?"

"No?" Mrs. Bickersteth dragged herself up. "What ever will your mother say? You must get back to make her tea."

The girl's bright face had clouded. She rose—Sir Raphael was watching her—and pulled on the soft, blue hat. Neatly, she thrust in the pin.

"I suppose we must go. What a pity! But the best things never last."

"Don't they!" said Trench under his breath.

CHAPTER XIII

IPER was worried. Those socks! She had learnt in the Steward's Room to-day that Mr. Trench had left Bagnoles. Lady Carnedin's maid was full of it and the young people's flirtation. But of course it wasn't good enough; no "family" and he lived on a farm! Still, it had helped to pass the time for Miss Verney during her mother's cure. Not so quiet as she looked? They had been seen in the garden at night "carrying-on" by one of the waiters. Not that Marie could blame Miss Verney, poor young lady! It must be a dull life, always in her old mother's pocket. Men were nothing to Marie-she shrugged her shoulders disdainfully and darted a glance at her latest admirer, a goodlooking valet, who had arrived with a gouty old gentleman in tow-still, Bagnoles was the limit! She was glad they were off on the morrow for Paris and was looking forward to town and the Season. She wondered how Piper could exist, all the year round, in a country place? It must feel like being buried alive!

Piper had responded tartly that her lady, too, went to London and visited her daughter there in a beautiful house with frequent parties. Miss Adela had married well, as of course she would, seeing who she was, her mother a cousin of Lord Paignton's—a peer, not a baronet.

With this, she had risen from the table, well-pleased, for Marie's master came under the latter category. Marie,

trying to patronize her! And her real name Mary Smith, born in Clerkenwell and thirty-five if she was a day!

In the quiet hour when the hall was empty, Piper went down to the bureau and looked into the Visitors' Book. Trench had left no address. She wondered if Miss Verney would tell her? Her mistress probably would know it, but Piper shrank from the confession. She wished she had left the socks alone. It was easy to say that Mr. Trench had Master Dicky's eyes and hair, but the old nurse knew this to be only a part of the truth. She loved the young man for himself; for his manner to her, never familiar, but kindly and interested. As if he judged her by a new standard: as an individual, apart from the fact that she was a valuable employee. This was rare in her experience. She did not realize that it held the essence of Democracy, for the word was anathema to her. Like many another Englishwoman with a fondness for Tradition, she confused it with Socialism, "Down-with-thegentry!" and Revolution.

If Labour came in, she understood, there would be no more "good service." The ladies would have to scrub and cook and act as nurses to their children, in order to pay higher doles, maternity benefits and a taxation levied especially at their class, so huge that it would wipe it out.

So, no Democracy for Piper! She hoped to die in Torlish Manor, her last years glorified by a sitting-room and black silk dresses, and have a "proper" funeral. Her old mistress would see to that, and you couldn't trust the "new gentry." They were "chancy" and all for show. Look what the Fowneses had done, engaging Mr. Gallup, who had been twenty years with their predecessors, then turn-

ing him out because he was lame! They couldn't keep a butler, she'd heard, who went "dot and one" over the parquet. But that was what you'd expect of folk who had their stores from London, cheating the local grocer—though Mr. Miggles had got it back on the night the electric plant went wrong and he found he was "out of" oil and candles! And hadn't there been a joke about it—every one in the village chuckling. Serve them right! Piper smiled at the reflection. All Lady Fownes could produce was night-lights, and by their radiance they had dined.

She decided to go for a little walk. There were cakes to be bought for tea and Mrs. Bickersteth would be hungry after her long motor drive. She pinned her hat on securely, donned her best black coat—a present from her dear lady—and set forth, her purse in her hand.

At the corner of the road, she found two boys maltreating a cat and spoke to them loudly and severely. The strange tongue had its effect, for the cat slipped away into safety. But how *rude* French boys could be!

She lingered in front of the florist's shop and turned up her nose at the butcher's—white rosettes and no decent sirloins—and eventually arrived at the smart pastry-cook's. Guyot's was deserted. She went in and chose the cakes, pointing to them with her finger; a madeleine and a brioche, both "plain and wholesome," and hesitated before a tray that held Mrs. Bickersteth's pet weakness: choux à la crème. Not good for her, still— Piper was in an indulgent mood.

Soon, she was plodding homewards. Very few people were about, and at the corner she recognized those boys

with their queer tam-o'-shanters without any bob on the top. Piper decided they must have lost them! They were whispering together near the fence. She passed them, erect and dignified. Suddenly she felt the *carton* holding the cakes snatched from her hand!

She wheeled round, to give chase, and saw it was hopeless. No policeman about—she could have wept! All that good money wasted and nothing for the mistress's tea. With a tight mouth, she retraced her steps.

The same young lady served her at Guyot's. Again she went through her pantomime. As she came out, she heard laughter behind her. It was too humiliating! She decided to keep the theft a secret and pay for the new cakes herself.

This time she reached the hotel in safety and was ready when she heard Mrs. Bickersteth's step in the corridor. She opened the door triumphantly, the kettle sending forth steam, the cakes arranged on their little platter. Tempting—her own cakes!

"Well, ma'am?" She was beaming.

"A lovely drive," Mrs. Bickersteth droned, "but I'm simply falling to sleep, Piper. The air was so strong to-day." She yawned as the maid drew off her coat. "It seems to have gone to my head!"

"Then you'd best lay down, ma'am," Piper advised. "I'll bring your tea to the bedside."

Mrs. Bickersteth willingly agreed. Soon she was leaning against the pillows.

"Tea will be nice. I can't think why I'm so thirsty! Thank you, Piper." She took the cup from her hands. "Plenty of milk. It must be the dust."

Piper obeyed. Then she handed the cakes.

"Your favourite, ma'am. A cream chew."

"Oh, no!" Mrs. Bickersteth recoiled. "I really couldn't eat anything more. I've had such a big lunch."

Piper's face went black as thunder. This was the climax—ingratitude! She could have slapped Mrs. Bickersteth, like one of her own children, turning up its nose at good food. Silently, her fingers shaking, she put the cakes into a tin.

"I'm going to tell you a great secret." Mrs. Bickersteth, eyes half-closed, drained her cup thankfully. "Who do you think we met in the forest?" No reply. Mrs. Bickersteth wondered. "Mr. Trench—with Sir Raphael Thring! And they drove with us and gave us lunch."

"Yes'm." Piper, head averted, poured water into the tea-pot. She sounded as lifeless as a dried haddock!

"Oh, dear, she's in a temper again," thought poor Mrs. Bickersteth. "I must try and bring her round, but I wish she wouldn't—it's so dull." Out aloud, she persevered: "You mustn't tell any one this, Nanna, but I felt I could trust you."

Piper slapped down the tea-pot lid.

"I'm sure I hope so. After all these years, ma'am." She drew herself up, plainly insulted.

Mrs. Bickersteth's head buzzed. She felt she could not cope with the mood.

"There"—she laid down her empty cup—"now I think I'll have a nap."

She closed her eyes, but Piper lingered, collecting the tea-things and putting away outdoor clothes strenuously.

At last, from the bed, came a snore. She wheeled round and stared at the sleeper. Yes, it was genuine.

"Heartless!" she muttered, and went out.

Across the darkness of her mood, flashed a tiny ray of light. Mr. Trench could not have left Bagnoles. But how was she to get at him?

Mrs. Bickersteth woke, an hour later, feeling refreshed. Her happiness over the young people was slightly dimmed by Piper's behaviour. She decided to dress for dinner early, without assistance, and go down. It would be a lesson to Piper, who thought herself invaluable.

She went to a drawer for some clean stockings and made a strange discovery. Among the neat little rolls was a pair of woollen socks! Men's socks? How extraordinary! They were wedged in between two pairs of stockings recently washed and darned by Piper. Could they have been packed by mistake? Mrs. Bickersteth took the socks to the light to see if they belonged to her husband. At that moment there came a tap at the door. She looked wildly around her and pushed the socks into her knitting bag. She dared not risk an inquiry which might imply carelessness.

"Come in!" she called, and Piper entered, bearing a can of hot water, determined her mistress should sleep no longer!

In a stony silence, she fastened the hooks. She was longing to ask for Trench's address. She must find out in some other way. But how, since her lips were sealed?

She watched Mrs. Bickersteth go forth and the tears welled up in her eyes. All these years—and to be so hard?

Not even a turn of the head and: "I shall be up early, Piper." That's what one got for faithful service. . . .

Totally unaware of this, Mrs. Bickersteth gave a sigh of relief when she reached the lift. She dreaded "scenes." Much better not to notice it and Piper would "come round." Poor old soul! Perhaps she'd been lonely, with her mistress out for so long. Mrs. Bickersteth decided to take her for a drive to-morrow, or the day after. Little she guessed what the drive would be!

In the lounge, a surprise awaited her, for there was Mrs. Verney, talking to Lady Carnedin. She smiled at Mrs. Bickersteth and introduced her two friends.

"I hear you've had a lovely day. So good of you to take Joceline." She was evidently in the best of moods. "And your nice old maid was very helpful. What a time she has been with you! She was telling me all about your home. It sounds such a dear old place. Do sit down."

Mrs. Bickersteth, feeling a little guilty, took the remaining chair.

They discussed the cure, Lady Carnedin relieved that her own was over, and the conversation turned to Paris where the latter was to stay for a week. She gave Mrs. Bickersteth the address of a certain cheap hat-shop at the back of the Avenue de l'Opéra—"as good as those in the Rue de la Paix"—and recommended a quiet hotel where she always stayed, in the Cours Albert Premier, patronized by her brother, the Bishop. Mrs. Bickersteth took down both addresses.

"You'll be lonely to-night," said Mrs. Verney. "I hear your young friend has gone. I think he might have wished

us good-bye. But he went off rather suddenly; to Mont St. Michel, the porter told me."

Mrs. Bickersteth was relieved when, at this juncture, Joceline appeared, wearing a new frock.

She looked lovely to-night, for the wind had touched her cheeks with a delicate bloom and the almond green georgette enhanced the tone of her hair and eyes.

The "colour of Spring"—the elderly lady recalled Madame de Mesnil's speech. Instead of Autumn—that early illusion when the girl in her russet gown had first appeared by her parent's side in the long dining-room. How love had changed her and quickened her beauty, breaking the spell laid upon her. But then life was full of Romance, if people only had eyes to see it.

"We bought that yesterday in the town," Mrs. Verney announced airily. "So I made her put it on. Turn round, Joceline! Now, isn't that a pretty back? Not an 'afterthought,' like so many English dresses, which suggest that the material ran short. There should be mystery in a back." She smiled and patted her white curls. "So that you long for a sight of the wearer. So many women concentrate on their effect when they *enter* a room, whereas it's really more important to leave a pleasant memory My mother, who was French, used to say that it needed 'discretion to advance, but elegance to retreat.' She was of the old school. Mercifully she was taken before the Era of Legs! Yes, dear"—she glanced at her daughter—"you're looking very sweet to-night."

Joceline's blue eyes were wistful. Mrs. Bickersteth could guess her thoughts; that, although she mistrusted her parent, she felt the burden of deceit. The old love

warred with the new. It must have cost her an effort to wear her mother's gift this evening.

Lady Carnedin consulted her watch, for the Verneys were dining with her in the restaurant of the hotel, early, in order that she might retire to bed in good time before her journey.

"Shall we go?" Mrs. Verney divined her thought. She rose to her feet, as the hostess agreed and shook out the folds of her silvery gown, suggestive of La Pompadour. Where the lace fichu was crossed on her bosom was a little wreath of yellow rosebuds with frosted leaves, and she wore an old necklace of beautifully-set topaz that carried out the same note of colour. "Am I tidy?" she asked Joceline.

"Perfect." The girl's voice was strained.

"Then, au revoir!" The old lady smiled sweetly at Mrs. Bickersteth. "We shall meet later on."

Off she went on her high heels, frail yet somehow suggesting a frank enjoyment of life and a sense of her own importance as a decoration to the scene. It was wonderful, Mrs. Bickersteth thought, how she could carry off her clothes, always costly and picturesque, without effort, serenely assured, like a china figure, most rare and precious, released from its glass case.

Her own face wore a frown. She was sorry for Joceline and a little troubled in her conscience. What a pity it was that Mrs. Verney's love for her daughter was so selfish. How happy everything might be! Mrs. Verney could let the Mentone Villa and spend her winters in California and Joceline could return with her, for a visit home, at intervals. In these days, the voyage was easy

and surrounded with every luxury, which they could easily afford. Instead of this, there would be a rupture. Mrs. Verney would not forgive her daughter. Perhaps they might never meet again. . . .

The gong disturbed her train of thought and she made her way to the dining-room. The meal seemed endlessly long to-night, with no one to talk to or to watch. The service dragged in her corner and she was thankful when, at length, she could rise from the table.

In the lounge, bridge had already started, Mrs. Verney erect as a willow wand, had begun a battle with the General who was one of her adversaries.

"Je double!" Mrs. Bickersteth heard her say, as she passed to capture a favourite chair out of the draught, in a good light.

Joceline was nowhere to be seen. Mrs. Bickersteth opened Adela's book at Chapter II and started again, determined to do her duty. She hoped she would soon get to "the story." At present it was all about people's thoughts; not what they did, but why they acted in this curious and unnatural fashion. What made it all the more confusing was that their impulses were derived from hereditary influences and she had to work back patiently to what the parents thought-not did. This was complicated by a mysterious factor which the author called "environment." Just as she saw a faint gleam of romance the novel switched off into medical matters connected with what Mrs. Bickersteth evaded as "morals." The writer openly called it "sex." But still she persevered. Mrs. Bickersteth's eyes widened. Suddenly she closed the book.

"Disgusting!" Her cheeks were flushed. "I can't think how Adela could have sent it. If that's modern, I'm glad I'm old-fashioned."

From where she sat she could see Mrs. Verney's face in profile. At this minute the little old lady looked like a sparrow-hawk scenting its prey. Her tiny hands, curled round the cards, with their pointed nails, might have been talons. She was winning and, in her smile, was something acquisitive and ruthless.

"No, I don't like her," thought the spectator. "I can imagine her being cruel. That charm is only superficial."

She leaned back, and her mind turned to those two who now must be close together, in the violet shadows that veiled the lake. If only Joceline were her daughter, how she would help her at this crisis. For, after all, it was not long descent or money that made a good husband. It was character and unselfishness. If Elsie, now— Mrs. Bickersteth felt a strange, disturbing doubt. California was "a long way off"...

This revived another problem. What was to be done about Elsie? There had been no more letters, but she would have to face the decision when she met her husband in Paris. If she stayed in Paris? There was Joceline, and she had offered to chaperon her. She might go straight home, if Trench sailed from St. Malo, and meet the young couple in London.

"Dear me, what a muddle it is!" She sighed. "I wish they'd make up their minds and that all this secrecy were over. Still, it's no good planning ahead."

She slipped lower in the chair. Imperceptibly, her eyes closed. The hum of voices rose and fell in a murmur,

soothing as the sea. She slept, her chin on her high bosom, the jet comb thrust forward, like the horns of a goat, butting, her plump hands with the emerald ring covering the "work of genius."

She woke with a start at the sound of her name. Mrs. Verney was bending over her.

"Oh!" She put up her hands to her hair and straightened the loosened comb. "Why, I must have been asleep!"

She gazed round her. The lounge was empty, swept clear of the crowd of guests, save for herself and the old lady, who looked more hawk-like than ever.

"I thought it better to rouse you now. It's past eleven," said Mrs. Verney. "I can't think where Joceline is."

"Joceline?" Mrs. Bickersteth started and collected her scattered wits. "Past eleven?" She struggled up. "You don't say so! She hasn't come in?"

"No. I sent upstairs to see if she could be there—we played late." Mrs. Verney's face was haggard, but she spoke with dignity. "It's very thoughtless of her. Besides she has been out all day. She might consider her mother now. I went to the end of the terrace, but there's no one there. I can't understand it. Do you think she's gone to the other hotel?"

All sorts of wild ideas had been flashing through Mrs. Bickersteth's mind. An elopement in earnest—was this the plan? She welcomed her companion's excuse.

"Possibly. There's dancing to-night. Yes, I expect she met the Thrings and they persuaded her to stay."

"But I thought you said he had gone away, with Mr.

Trench, to Mont St. Michel?" Mrs. Verney's eyes narrowed.

"I'd forgotten that." Mrs. Bickersteth felt more and more uncomfortable. "Still, Lady Thring is still there. She's taking the cure—" She broke off, her attention caught by the swinging door. "Ah, here she is!" she cried with relief.

But the next moment it turned to dread.

Joceline stood on the threshold, a thin black cloak drawn round her that seemed to accentuate her pallor. There were dark shadows under her eyes. Her hair, ruffled by the breeze, made a halo about her set face. She looked like an avenging angel!

"Joceline!" Mrs. Verney called. "Where have you been? Do you know the time?"

"Yes." The girl moved forward, her eyes filled with a cold anger, unflinchingly fixed on her parent. "I'm ready. Ready to wait on you."

Deliberate intention was in the words. Mrs. Bickersteth was horrified.

"My dear," she said, "your mother's been anxious."

It was both a hint and a gentle reproof, but Joceline ignored her intervention.

"If it's late," she said to Mrs. Verney, still with that searching, inimical glance, "you'd better go to bed."

The little old lady seemed to droop. She felt with her hand for the back of the chair, grasped it and drew a fluttering breath.

"I don't—feel well," she murmured.

Mrs. Bickersteth, vexed and anxious, offered her a supporting arm.

"You're tired." She frowned at Joceline, but the girl retained her stony composure.

"I expect you've had too much bridge. If you're delicate, why do you do it?"

Mrs. Verney drew herself up.

"I don't require your opinion." Her voice was clear and dignified. "You forget yourself, Joceline."

She turned and, without any further symptom of weakness, walked with Mrs. Bickersteth, a light hand on the latter's arm, in the direction of the lift.

Joceline followed. The night porter took them up to the first floor.

Mrs. Verney, unaided, stepped out.

"Good night." Her black eyes had a smouldering fire in them as she shook hands with her neighbour. "I hope you won't be too tired."

"Oh, no. Good night." Mrs. Bickersteth felt unequal to the situation.

She turned to intercept the girl, but she slipped past, with a swift sign behind Mrs. Verney's back, and followed in her parent's wake.

Mrs. Bickersteth, sorely troubled, made her way to her room. She wanted time to think, and she couldn't even confide in Piper, who received her with a martyred expression and a glance at the clock.

"Yes, it's late," her mistress admitted. "But I was kept. As soon as you've got me out of my dress, you'd better go to bed, Nanna. I mustn't miss my bath again."

She was thinking solely of herself, but the words went to Piper's heart.

"You needn't be afraid, ma'am, that I shall oversleep myself." She shook out the skirt viciously. "It has only happened *once*. And I'm not as young as I used to be!"

"No." Mrs. Bickersteth's voice was absent. "We none of us are." Her thoughts had returned to Mrs. Verney. "Thank you, Piper. I'm sorry I kept you up so late."

Silence. She looked behind her. The door was closing on Piper's back. She hadn't even lit the night-light!

Mrs. Bickersteth did this herself, but recalled the omission later as she was scrambling into bed. For there came a soft tap at the door. She sighed and lowered herself again onto the floor, to patter across and turn the handle. It must be Piper—repentant! She peeped through the crack as she opened the door and there stood Joceline!

"Oh, it's you! Come in, my dear, if you don't mind my being undressed."

"I'm so sorry," murmured the girl. "But I had to see you. It's important—a message from Oliver."

"That's all right." Mrs. Bickersteth was wideawake now. "But I think I'll just get back into bed, because of my rheumatism, and you can sit on the side." She proceeded to do so. "I'm glad you've come. I was worrying. Just give me that fleecy shawl. Would you like to turn on the light?"

"No, we can see quite well as it is." She wrapped the shawl round her friend's shoulders. "May I really sit here?" She perched herself at the foot, drawing up a slender knee and clasping her hands round it. Her eyes, still mutinous, met the kind ones surveying her under the

tight little rolls that would wave the grey hair on the morrow. "Oliver wants you to know our plans, and I couldn't come to you before."

"How is your mother?" Mrs. Bickersteth felt anxious.

"She's quite well—now," said Joceline coldly.

"My dear, I hope you haven't quarrelled?"

"It's beyond a quarrel," Joceline answered. "I know at last what she says."

"What?" Mrs. Bickersteth quivered.

"A wicked lie," said the girl slowly. "I shall never forgive her, or love her again."

"You shouldn't! She's still your mother." Joceline's lips curled. "Yes, I mean it. But tell me everything, my child?"

She saw Joceline shake her head. A lock of hair fell forward and she brushed it back impatiently.

"I want you to give me a promise first. Not to breathe a word, to *any one*, before twelve o'clock to-morrow. Oliver insists on this. Will you?"

Mrs. Bickersteth hesitated. Supposing she did not approve of the plan? There was terrible trouble brewing. She could feel it in the air. Still, for so short an interval? She gave in.

"I'll promise you."

"On your honour?" the girl insisted.

"On my honour." Mrs. Bickersteth's voice was solemn.

"Ah!" Joceline drew a deep breath. "I knew you would. And you've been so kind that we couldn't go and leave you, wondering what had happened to us."

"Go?"

"Yes. I'm off to-morrow, early, to join Oliver."

Mrs. Bickersteth struggled up from her comfortable position, a look of horror on her face.

"Not alone? You can't. It isn't proper! Or perhaps the Thrings— You mean their hotel?"

"Oh, no, I'm leaving Bagnoles. But I can't tell you where. You mustn't know. Mother would get it out of you. Listen!" She caught Mrs. Bickersteth's hand and leaned forward urgently. "It's the only way. It was my plan. Now that I know—know what she's done. All these years"—her voice rose—"whilst I've trusted her, waited on her like a servant, sacrificed my youth to her! The cruel, wicked treachery—" She choked, but went on again: "There's only one way to punish her. Money—she loves money. And besides, it's mine. My father meant me to have it. Very well!" She threw up her head. "I shall take it now, for Oliver's sake. It will make all the difference to him. I won't marry him without it! I've told him that and at last he agrees."

"You'll take it without your mother's consent?" Mrs. Bickersteth was trying to follow. "But can you? When it says in the will—"

Joceline interrupted her.

"I shall force her to give her consent." In the shadows thrown by the night-light she seemed to shoot up, her golden head like a flower on its stem, quivering with life and passion. "Don't you understand?" Her voice rang. "Until mother allows the marriage, I'm going to live with Oliver!"

"Live with him?" Mrs. Bickersteth gasped. She had never been so shocked in her life. "You can't! Think of your reputation? I shall not allow it"—the bed vibrated

with her virtuous indignation—"I shall speak to Oliver."

"You won't have a chance. He's off. That's why he sent me to tell you. It's all arranged. We've made up our minds. We're not children—we know what we're doing. But—I quite understand what you think." Her cheeks were flaming now.

Mrs. Bickersteth wisely changed her tactics. In vain, she pleaded with the girl.

"Supposing your mother refuses?" she wailed. "She might—you can never tell. Where would you be then?"

"She won't refuse. We shall give her a week to send us her consent in writing, care of the Crédit Lyonnais. If she doesn't she'll know the next step: we shan't hide any longer! Oh, I've thought it all out." Her face darkened. "I shall write to the old vicar at home and tell him exactly how we're placed—that it all lies in mother's hands. She would never face a public scandal, for it to be known all over Norfolk. There's nothing against Oliver. Every one would realize that it all hinges on the money."

"And you'd let them think that of your mother?" Mrs. Bickersteth recoiled. "I never heard anything so wicked!"

Joceline slipped down from the bed. She stood, facing her accuser, head high, eyes defiant.

"I can't help that. It's my turn now. She frightened away Horace and Terence, but she's met her match in Oliver."

"And supposing it kills your mother? You've forgotten her weak heart."

"Have I!" The girl actually laughed. "Oh, she'll be ill if it's convenient! Did you see her in the hall, pretend-

ing? I made a discovery to-night. I found the prescription for the cachets she takes when she has a heart attack. I was brushing her coat before I went out and it was in the pocket. She's never shown it to me, so I read it. And what do you think it was?" Mrs. Bickersteth held her breath, hypnotized by the speaker's expression. "A mild dose of bromide and bismuth! What you'd give to an hysterical girl." She threw out her hands fiercely. "And I thought it would raise her from the dead!"

"No!" Mrs. Bickersteth's last hope crumbled. She was overwhelmed by the change in Joceline. This was what came, she thought, when age made war on youth, denying it hope or fruition. There was a breaking-point, when tradition was swept to the winds of heaven and recklessness took its place. "My dear, my dear, it's too dreadful! You mustn't do it. It spells ruin. I'm not taking your mother's part. I'm thinking of you and the future. Even if you succeed in your scheme, there'll be all this behind you. How can you expect Oliver to respect you? Love is all very well, but it must be based on respect in marriage."

"Oliver?" Joceline smiled. "I'm not afraid! There's no one like him. He's wonderful! Why shouldn't he have his happiness? He deserves it. And so do I. You've had it—a husband and children. Why should it be denied me? Because I have a cruel mother? Oh, it's all very well to talk of love, but there's justice as well. You've been just and so your children honour you. You haven't tried all your life to break them—they don't feel helpless in your power. So they're happy with you—Oh, don't cry! I'm sorry—I hate hurting you." She

leaned forward impulsively, her hands on Mrs. Bicker-steth's shoulders, and kissed the cheeks wet with tears. "Forgive us! Some day you'll understand."

Before Mrs. Bickersteth could collect her scattered wits, the girl had retreated. She vanished in the dark shadows.

"Joceline!" she gasped. "Come back! I can't let you go like this."

All she heard was the sound of the door gently closed.

She was so upset that her limbs would not move. She lay there, propped against the pillows, the tears rolling down, unchecked. Those two, who had grown so dear to her, living in sin—unrepentant. . . .

At last, she found her handkerchief, wiped her eyes and regained control.

"I must see her in the morning," she thought. "Before I go to my bath. I'd never have dreamed it of Oliver! If only I knew where he was and what—" She started, eyes wide.

Only now did it flash across her that the secret had been in her grasp and she had let it escape her. Her maternal instincts had tripped her up, the sense of the girl's moral danger outweighing curiosity.

For what had Mrs. Verney "said"?

CHAPTER XIV

WICE before she set forth for her bath did Mrs.

Bickersteth furtively steal along to Joceline's room and tap on the door, but with no response.

In consequence she missed the bus which she usually took, in Mrs. Verney's company, and saw no signs of that lady. For this she was devoutly thankful.

On her return, when she left the lift, she slipped again down the corridor. Now the door stood wide open. A valet de chambre was sweeping the floor, collecting the litter left from packing. It was too late; the bird had flown!

After the first touch of despair, a sharp reaction set in. Mrs. Bickersteth was exasperated. She washed her hands of the truants. No good making herself quite ill, and this morning she felt as bad as when she had arrived at Bagnoles. Sir Raphael's hospitality had stirred up the demon, gout.

No wonder she was irritable, she told herself. It was the worry and the sense of her own powerlessness. She could not even talk to Piper until the clock should strike twelve. And Piper was now in her nicest mood. She had apologized, early that morning, at the sight of her mistress's swollen eyes—which she put down to her own behaviour!

A sudden longing to get out of Bagnoles seized Mrs. Bickersteth. She was dreading a meeting with Mrs. Verney, impossible to avoid if she lunched in the hotel. It

was a perfect day and the happy thought came to her of an expedition into the country.

She decided to go to La Ferté-Macé—only twenty minutes by train—in her old clothes, with Piper. But not to take lunch. She was sick of fowl and, unless she tipped the headwaiter, it was sure to be a leg! So that one saved nothing.

Piper approved the scheme, especially when she learnt there were shops. Drives at Bagnoles left her cold. You couldn't for ever look at the trees, and the roads in France seemed deserted, save for motor cars and dust. At her suggestion, they went second-class and felt economical, which added to the pleasure. In these times it was right to be careful.

The slow train tipped them out into the centre of the town, a matter for congratulation, for the sun was at its zenith. Moreover, it was market-day and the narrow streets were congested, but this added to the sense of adventure. In the main square a fountain was playing. Picturesquely grouped about it were the little stalls and the big umbrellas under which, sphinx-like but avid, ancient dames were nursing fowls, baskets of eggs and fresh cheeses, or bargaining vociferously. Fruit and green stuff showed up gaily against the dark shawls of the vendors, adding a brilliant note of colour: the tart red strawberries of the woods, purple figs and oranges, whilst great pumpkins that suggested half-forgotten fairy tales sprawled on the pavement, in ochre glory, with gashes where a slice had left the apricot heart revealed.

Mrs. Bickersteth was charmed, Piper a shade critical, though she approved the Normandy caps, so exquisitely

laundered, that surrounded the dark, wrinkled faces, with their black eyes, arched noses, and the curiously virile air of these women, so unlike the Bagnoles social set.

They wandered in and out of the turmoil and occasionally made a purchase: pillow-lace edging for underlinen, some little dishes for *œufs au plat* in coarse blue and white faïence, and finally, the food for lunch.

Hot, exhausted, but happy, they settled down at a laiterie, ordered milk and found a corner in the cool, shuttered place, with a table to themselves. And what a delicious meal it was! Cream cheese and cucumber with a crisp roll and butter; cakes and fruit for the second course.

"It's better for me to-day than meat," Mrs. Bickersteth confessed. "I'm feeling a shade gouty." She helped herself to strawberries and saw Piper's lips tighten. "These little ones can't hurt. Besides it's not from food; it's worry." She started, for the market clock had begun to chime twelve slow notes. Now the church joined in and the air vibrated with the clamour. Mrs. Bickersteth drew a breath of relief. "Thank Heaven! I can tell you at last! I've had a dreadful time, Nanna."

She poured out her dramatic story and Piper listened, sitting on the edge of her chair and longing for an orange—but it wasn't an easy thing to eat. Pips. She speedily forgot this desire as Mrs. Bickersteth reached the climax and, breathless, demanded Piper's opinion.

Piper gave it willingly. She put all the blame on Mrs. Verney. Though who would have thought it of Miss Joceline? Always so ladylike and brought up as she had been! It seemed to Mrs. Bickersteth that the old nurse was less scandalized by the elopement itself than by the

fact that the culprits belonged to her lady's own class. They ought to be "setting an example."

Piper tried to exonerate Trench. It had been Miss Verney's plan, obviously the old story—which she firmly believed—of Eve and the apple. She summed it up in one pregnant sentence:

"If only they can be married in time—and nobody gets to hear of it!"

For Piper was a philosopher. Many a marriage in the village had begun in this disastrous fashion and yet had turned out happily. It gave the young wife a hold on her husband. If he didn't work, or took to drink, she could say to him: "You brought me to this! I didn't want to marry you. I only did it for the child." And that made a man look a fool and turn to—if he'd any gumption!

But you didn't expect it in the gentry. She made this contention so plain that Mrs. Bickersteth revolted. Nature was the same for all. Piper looked sceptical, but she saw that her mistress was grieving. She did her best to comfort her. It would all come right and no one need know. If only Mrs. Verney—

"Ah!" Mrs. Bickersteth read the doubt in the lined old face across the table. "Will she give in? That's my fear."

"She'll have to," said Piper stoutly. "She hasn't got a leg to stand on."

"But-we don't know yet what she says—what's behind it all," her mistress protested.

"We know as it isn't true." Piper nodded her head sagely. "It might take in outside folk, but she didn't dare

try it on Sir Roland, or whilst her husband was alive. It wouldn't go down in her own village, if Miss Verney should write to the vicar."

"No, I hadn't thought of that." Mrs. Bickersteth looked relieved.

"And if I were you, ma'am," Piper suggested, "I wouldn't be mixed up in it. She'd make a bad enemy and it's not as if it were our affair. We've got to stay on here and, if you go worriting, you'll undo all the cure. I'm sure Dr. Spalding would back me up. You was looking dead-beat this morning, with the bad night—and my temper!" There was real contrition in her voice. "I'd just give out that I knew nothink. It would be best, with Mrs. Verney."

"Oh, no." Mrs. Bickersteth straightened her shoulders. Lunch and the good talk had revived her. "If she asks me, I shall speak the truth." She was feeling uncommonly pugnacious, as if she would really enjoy the fray. She blinked in a ray of light that had found a crack in the shutters and her gaze fell on her hands. Yes, her knuckles were swollen this morning. How unfair it was that one should suffer for an earlier generation's port. Why couldn't *they* have had this gout? "I shall do my duty," she added firmly.

Piper repressed a smile. She remembered, years ago, overhearing Miss Christabel say: "When mother talks of doing her duty, you know that we're in for squalls! Let's be very good to-day, or else we shan't get to the circus."

Peace settled on the dairy. Even beyond it the noise was hushed. Men were clustered, thick as flies, round the tables outside the cafés, somnolent over their wine

and coffee. Strange, this out-of-door life, so different from the empty look of an English town in the dinner-hour. Piper, in her mind, decided it would be all right—except for the smells!

Mrs. Bickersteth broke the silence:

"What I can't get over, Nanna, is that story about the prescription. *Pretending* all those years and nothing really wrong with her heart!"

"It served its purpose," said Piper dryly. "But I never thought she looked the *colour*, though it's hard to tell with Mrs. Verney, using all those paints and powders. I'm sure it gave me quite a turn, ma'am, to see an old lady of her age and so bold about it too! She didn't mind me being there whilst she was blackening her eyes. With a little brush, ma'am, out of a pot!"

"No?" Mrs. Bickersteth was intrigued. "I thought her eyelashes were dark. Of course," she said incoherently, "she lives abroad half the year."

"That's it." Piper tightened her lips. "And that's what's the matter with Miss Verney. She's lost her sense of right and wrong. I'm sure I'm sorry for Mr. Trench."

"But it's his fault too. He shouldn't allow it." Mrs. Bickersteth tried to be just.

"Oh, well, ma'am, he's only a man," said Piper with a wise smile.

Mrs. Bickersteth went in to dinner on the last vibration of the gong. Still in her pugnacious mood, she hoped Mrs. Verney would appear and watched the door, between spoonfuls of soup. It was *potage* à *l'oseille* which she rather liked to-night, with its faintly bitter flavour. The

frugal lunch had given her an appetite. Her headache had gone and she felt ready to fight the young people's battle, if it was forced on her. Although she was horrified by their conduct, something must be done at once. Every day spent together added to their offence in the sight of God and man. Mrs. Verney must act, and act quickly. So Mrs. Bickersteth girded her loins.

She had arrived at the third course when, through the doorway, came a vision of picturesque old age. Mrs. Verney looked wonderful to-night, in an oyster-coloured gown, a black lace shawl over her shoulders. Little black slippers with red heels and a small, red, lacquered fan added a note of brilliancy and, against the full ruched skirt as she moved, swung a bag holding her handkerchief, made of vivid geranium petals.

With her white hair dressed high, little, rolled curls over her ears, and her china-like powdered face, she suggested a woman half her age attired for a masquerade. There was even a minute, black patch on her left cheek close to her eye and, as she floated up the room, fragile and coquettish, she smiled and nodded to her friends, her painted lips curved with pleasure; or so it appeared on the surface.

Mrs. Bickersteth felt a thrill of horror. She watched the head-waiter hurry forward and surround Mrs. Verney with every attention, and the thought flashed through her mind that he must be well-tipped. She remembered Trench's bitter remark: "You can—on an extra thousand a year!"

Was it possible that she was glad? That she hoped Trench would go off with her daughter to California and marry her, worn-out by delay, leaving Mrs. Verney in

possession of her present income? And all without the old lady's connivance, in the teeth of her prohibition, so that her conscience might be clear. Mrs. Bickersteth checked her imagination which was sailing off with her reason. For might it not be a magnificent bluff, to deceive the hotel since her daughter's flight, the result of her undying pride?

Mrs. Bickersteth, staring across the room, met a shrewd glance from those dark eyes and forced a smile, to receive in return the flutter of a tiny hand in an amicable gesture. She did not wish to appear watchful and, for the remainder of the meal, she read an old, Devonshire paper, forwarded by her husband and which seemed to be full of strikes, of bitter party feeling, violent crimes and smallpox! What was the world coming to? No law or order anywhere.

"Every one out for himself," Mrs. Bickersteth decided. "With never a thought for the nation. Really, the French are more patriotic. They want their country to go on."

She timed her departure from the table to coincide with Mrs. Verney's and caught her up in the lounge as she paused to greet Mme. de Mesnil.

"And where is your charming daughter to-night?" the latter enquired. "Not ill, I hope?"

"On the contrary!" Mrs. Verney smiled. "She has gone to stay with some friends at a Villa. I miss her, but I mustn't be selfish. It is a little change for the child." The Countess had looked curious, but now she nodded, satisfied. "Ah, here is Mrs. Bickersteth." Mrs. Verney turned her head. "I haven't seen you all day! Shall we have our coffee together? I'm not going to play bridge

to-night. My eyes have been giving me trouble—the dust, I think—and the cards tire them. I should be glad of a chat."

Against her will, Mrs. Bickersteth was moved to honest admiration. For the eyes, with their skilfully darkened lashes, were shadowed by heavy lids. They had wept bitter tears.

"You must be careful," she said quickly. "I suffered, too, after that long drive to Domfront. The dust here is full of lime."

Mme. de Mesnil was listening, puzzled. Mrs. Verney translated the word.

"And now, what about coffee?" she asked. "You must all be my guests to-night. And liqueurs—I feel in the mood for liqueurs!" "The General" had joined the group, with her depressed daughter-in-law, and promptly accepted for them both. She rarely refused an invitation. "That's right. We shall want some more chairs."

Beckoning to a waiter, she ordered coffee for five and consulted their tastes in liqueurs.

They settled down round the table, Mrs. Verney the life and soul of the party. The "Old Guard," she christened it.

"Isn't it strange," she said, "how during a cure one forms a circle in the early days without effort, and then, as it grows smaller, one has not the energy to find fresh friends to fill the gaps? Somehow, you feel that the time is too short and also, that the newcomers are interlopers!" She laughed and shrugged her shoulders. "So absurd, yet very human. We none of us want to be superseded."

"C'est vrai!" Mme. de Mesnil smiled. "It is one of the hardships of age, madame. Still, we live on in our children."

Mrs. Verney was pouring out the coffee. Her hand shook and the cup overflowed.

"How clumsy of me! But it is heavy. I have always had such weak wrists."

Mrs. Bickersteth came to the rescue:

"Let me do it?"

"Would you?" Mrs. Verney willingly relinquished her task. "In these little matters I miss my Joceline."

Again the question was put to her, this time by "the General." Mrs. Verney returned the same answer and added:

"Some young people are staying there. A dance and so forth."

"At the Villa des Fleurs?" "the General" demanded in her best court-martial manner, as she slipped some sugar into her bag, where already she had secreted an orange.

For a moment the other hesitated; then, with a slight touch of hauteur, she faced the inquisitive old dame.

"Oh, no. Some English friends."

"But you should be there too, madame," the Countess interposed sweetly, annoyed by "the General's" want of taste. "In that beautiful gown. It is a poem!"

"Ah, you like it?" Mrs. Verney was pleased. It is only a réchauffé, but I really could not part with the satin."

They began to talk dress.

When the last drop of coffee had been drained, "the General" became restless. They must find a fourth for bridge. No, her daughter-in-law would not play.

She was here for repose—she hesitated, and Mrs. Bickersteth held her breath, pitying the poor young matron. Surely "the General" would not again set forth the object of this visit? But Mme. de Mesnil rose from the table with a graceful little speech. They would miss dear Mrs. Verney at bridge, but she was wise to take care of her eyesight. Delicious, the coffee and liqueurs!

There followed no suggestion of returning the hospitality on a future occasion. It wasn't done. The British were extravagant and, with the Exchange as it stood, they could well afford it, *voyons!* England hadn't been invaded, which was why they were tiresome about the Ruhr.

When the pair were left alone, Mrs. Verney began to discuss this question with Mrs. Bickersteth. It was obvious that she sympathized with the aims of her mother's country. Every now and then, she would glance about her, watching the crowd settle down to its evening occupations: cards, conversation and needlework. From the little salon came the sound, veiled and discreet, of the piano; one of the younger generation displaying an amateur talent, for the benefit of the old ladies, hermetically sealed and safe from smoke.

At last Mrs. Verney leaned forward and caught Mrs. Bickersteth's wandering attention.

"I wonder if you would mind," she asked, "coming up to my room for a little? There is something I want to say to you and we should be quiet there."

Mrs. Bickersteth, soothed by Sous la Feuillée, played with the soft pedal down, started.

"Of course not. Certainly." She was glad she had re-

fused that liqueur. She would want all her wits about her. "Shall we go now?"

"Yes, I think we can slip away." Mrs. Verney rose and moved off with a leisurely step. When she came to the bridge-table, she paused and glanced at "the General's" hand. Gaunt and outwardly depressed, that tyro was holding four aces! "Bonne fortune!" she breathed, and passed on.

The lift carried the pair upstairs. Mrs. Verney produced her key, opened the door and switched on the lights.

"Now!" she pulled a chair forward. "I think you will find this comfortable. And a cushion? I always bring some with me."

Mrs. Bickersteth, subsiding, thought as she gazed round the room that the Verneys' baggage must be enormous. There was everything which tended to comfort, from the satin quilt in the same soft mauve as the filmy night-dress spread upon it, that matched the dainty *peignoir* and slippers, to the china service they used for tea. Her eyes wandered to the dressing-table and its treasures.

"What lovely tortoise-shell!" she exclaimed. "Aren't you afraid of its getting broken? Chambermaids are so careless."

"It belongs to my dressing-case." Mrs. Verney's voice was indifferent. "I think I must have a cigarette. It quiets my nerves. Do you smoke?" She offered the case, in gold and enamel, but Mrs. Bickersteth shook her head. "I'm so troubled to-night—though I hope I don't show it?"

"You don't," Mrs. Bickersteth assured her. "I think you've been—wonderful!"

"Ah, then you know? The truth about Joceline?" The dark eyes searched her face. "That she's gone away with that wicked young man, left me, through his influence! I guessed as much after dinner when Mme. de Mesnil was questioning me."

Mrs. Bickersteth nodded gravely.

"Yes, you were in their confidence." Mrs. Verney's voice trembled. "You and Joceline. Instead of—" She bit her lip. Suddenly her composure gave way. The delicately painted old face seemed to break up, into a network of lines, as she uncurbed her emotion. Her head went down onto her hands. "What have I done," she wailed, "to be treated like this? My own daughter! The deceit—the cruel blow to me! Joceline, brought up as she has been, to desert me for a stranger. A man outside her own class! And I can do nothing—powerless!" She sobbed, her frail shoulders shaken. "If only I knew where they were!"

Mrs. Bickersteth's heart was wrung with pity. Her animosity had fled. Here was a parent, old and stricken, imploring help from another.

"I wish I could tell you, but I can't! I haven't the faintest idea myself. But you mustn't give way." She leaned forward, a hand laid on the other's knee. "It's dreadfully sad, but you can—" She stopped.

For Mrs. Verney had jerked up her head. In the darks eyes veiled by tears, she read a sudden, fierce disappointment. Here was not sorrow so much as anger.

"You don't *know* where they've gone? No, I see that you don't. My last hope!" Once more she collapsed, her face hidden in her hands.

But now Mrs. Bickersteth felt a doubt. She remembered Joceline's reason for withholding the address: "Mother would get it out of you," and she was aware of her moment of weakness, and of something, deep and true, missing in the other's grief. It had been a shrewd attempt to break down her own guard. Ah, she was clever, Mrs. Verney! Mrs. Bickersteth straightened her shoulders, and settled down to the task before her.

"Still, you must act—act at once. It's dreadful, but it can be stopped. I mean, they want to be married and it all lies in your hands. And no one need know—you can trust me—but they mustn't go on living together. They won't, if you give your consent to the match."

"My consent?" Mrs. Verney quivered. "Never!"

Mrs. Bickersteth was stunned by the deadly purpose in in the word. She watched Mrs. Verney draw herself up, produce a lace-edged handkerchief, so small that it was of no use, toss it aside contemptuously and rise to her feet. She crossed the room, found a larger one, wiped her eyes and blew her nose. Then she moved to the dressing-table. Picking up the powder-puff, she passed it over her ravaged face, leaning forward to mark the result. It was done almost unconsciously, but Mrs. Bickersteth was disgusted.

"But you don't mean—you can't mean you will let them go on, living in sin?" She was so indignant that she choked.

"There will be no need." With her handkerchief, Mrs. Verney removed a little smudge in the hollow beneath one eye. "It was foolish of me to break down, but my nerves were overstrained. I'm old, and my heart is not very

strong." She came back to her chair and seated herself with dignity. Now her whole manner had changed. She surveyed her visitor coldly and incuriously. "I am not going to ask you any questions. You are in their confidence and I know your opinion of Mr. Trench. Although"—her nostrils curled—"I can hardly believe you approve of his present conduct?"

"I do not." Mrs. Bickersteth resented the inference. "I am shocked that it should have come to this!" She made her meaning obvious.

"Yet you encouraged them," Mrs. Verney put in shrewdly. "Oh, of course I've seen. I'm not blind! You yourself desired the marriage. Apart from its obvious drawbacks—I refer to money and position—I have my own private reason for withholding my consent."

"Yes?"

Mrs. Verney smiled. For in the word was a naïve curiosity. It satisfied the clever old woman.

"A very serious reason indeed," she resumed with an air of assurance. "But, besides this, I know my daughter's character. This adventure is utterly alien to it; the result of a sudden loss of balance. She has always been hysterical—the real cause of her nervous troubles. In consequence, there will be a reaction." Her voice hardened. "Joceline will return to me. She is highly-strung and too fastidious to endure the present degrading conditions. She will not remain that man's mistress." Mrs. Bickersteth flinched at the plain word. "There is nothing coarse in her nature. Moreover, she is deeply religious. She will awake to shame and horror. Mr. Trench has made a grave mistake and his influence will not last."

"I'm afraid I don't agree with you." Mrs Bickersteth had no hesitation in speaking her mind at this juncture. She was outraged by the other's calm acceptance of the situation. To sit there and wait and do nothing when her own flesh and blood was in danger! "You seem to forget they love each other. From something Joceline has told me, I don't believe she has ever cared, in the right way, for a man before. Oliver is devoted to her, and he has a strong will. The times, too, have changed. Young people now insist on living their own lives, and it is a lawless age. I think you should be prepared for the worst; that if you withhold your consent you will drive them into—an open scandal." Mrs. Verney's eyes flashed, but on went the speaker urgently: "I feel I have no right to advise you, but if she were my own daughter, however much I might resent her behaviour to myself, I should think first of her moral welfare."

She paused for breath. Had she made an impression? Mrs. Verney was leaning back, staring before her into space. There was cruelty in the line of her lips, yet the tears stood once more in her eyes and her hands gripped the arms of her chair. The sincere woman, watching her, wondered if her heart were softening. She altered her line of attack:

"Joceline is not a young girl and she has passed through much sorrow. It may be her last chance of marriage. Put yourself in her place. Why shouldn't she have the happiness that you and I have known—a loving husband, possibly children? She has been a devoted daughter to you, as you have told me yourself. Is her reward to be *lone-liness* in her old age?"

Silence succeeded the question. The old lady seemed lost in thought. Mrs. Bickersteth was praying, incoherently, but with faith—the Almighty would understand her! That speech now, about "the first stone"; and forgiveness for those who had "loved much." But that was no excuse for a mother to drive a child to recklessness, and then stand by and watch her ruin.

Mrs. Verney drew herself erect. With an air of pronouncing an ultimatum, she said in a prophetic voice:

"Joceline will return to-morrow. Of her own accord—broken, repentant. I see it all clearly now. She will never marry Trench."

Mrs. Bickersteth rose to her feet. She had failed.

"To-morrow? You deceive yourself. Unless you mean you will wire to Paris?"

"I shall do nothing," said Mrs. Verney. She rose too, and held out her hand. "Thank you for this conversation. It has helped to clear my mind. You will see that I am right. Her father would have forbidden the match, and I—"

Mrs. Bickersteth broke in:

"But then, the sin of it all!"

"There is no remedy for sin." Mrs. Verney's voice was solemn. "Only remorse and repentance. Good night." Her face softened. Something wistful stole into her eyes. "You have been both kind and honest. I am sorry we cannot agree. Believe me, Mrs. Bickersteth, I am thinking of Joceline's future. A marriage after what has occurred would be built on sand, not rock." She saw that her words had gone home. They had formed a part of the younger woman's own argument with Joceline over-

night. "But it's all part of my punishment." She hesitated, then went on, "Yes, I will confess to you. Years ago, I foreswore my faith in order to marry Mr. Verney. I sinned—not as Joceline is sinning, but from the same cause, youthful passion. If I had been true to the creed in which I was born and found my strength, Joceline might have had behind her the living force of the Catholic Church. I have robbed her of this—and I must pay!" The word came out with a little sob. There was no doubt of her earnestness now. "But I loved my husband too well. And I lost him. Now I stand alone." Her hand in Mrs. Bickersteth's tightened. The tears rose and overflowed. "Would you"—she swayed forward, her whole attitude a prayer—"kiss an unhappy old woman? I feel so terribly lonely to-night."

There was only one response to this in a heart as simple and generous as Mrs. Bickersteth's. Her arms went round the frail old creature.

"My dear, it's cruel! But do think it over?" She kissed the faintly perfumed cheek. "Is there anything I can do for you? Would you like Piper to help you to bed?"

"If you can spare her, it would be most kind." Mrs. Verney stood back and wiped her eyes. A flicker of pride made her add, "Explain to her that I've had some bad news."

"I will." Mrs. Bickersteth felt guilty. But Piper knew how to keep a secret. "I'll send her in to you at once."

"Thank you." Mrs. Verney was thinking. At the door she paused. "Whatever happens, remember it's all

for Joceline's sake. That I've lived for her—my first thought."

Mrs. Bickersteth was sorely puzzled as she made her way down the passage. Was there ever such wrong-headedness? And yet a parent's love behind it. Could maternal love be a snare? In contrast to the form it took in the proud and dominant old lady, those children's conduct seemed truer to nature. She forgot that, in Joceline's case, it was complicated by revenge. They had thrown away everything for love—Mrs. Bickersteth wiped her eyes. What a romance, and tragedy!

There was no time to explain to Piper. She sent the old nurse off on her mission, urging her to be kind and silent. Perhaps the night would bring counsel? Restless, Mrs. Bickersteth sought the cool air on her balcony.

Silence enfolded the lake and the distant brooding hills under a sky that was cloudless and, yet, wore a veil, the light of the myriad stars. The great planets hung low, like the nearest ranks of a procession, to thicken over the Forêt d'Andaine and melt into the Milky Way. World upon world—obeying a rule. Was that the secret which had escaped the careless intelligence of mortals after the anarchy of war? The thought came dimly to the watcher. It had shaken humanity into shattered particles; every man for himself, disregarding the rule of God. . . .

Where were those two young people now? Vaguely, in her mind, she pictured them at Mont St. Michel, watching the same wonderful night, side by side, in an upper room that overhung the wine-coloured sea. It was difficult not to forgive them! When you *knew* people who "went

wrong," were fond of them, it made a difference. How could Mrs. Verney hold out?

"She won't," Mrs. Bickersteth decided. "She'll think it over in the darkness. Poor soul, she'll have no sleep to-night."

But Piper, on her return, had another story to tell. She had left Mrs. Verney, propped up in bed, calm and apparently resigned, reading a book that "looked religious, although it wasn't the Bible, ma'am," and her last request had been for a box that contained some cachets, which stood on her washing-stand. She had explained to Piper that the contents would make her sleep!

Mrs. Bickersteth's dream faded.

"You're sure they're not for her heart?"

"Quite. She opened the box, ma'am, and counted them. There were four left and she took out one and put it beside her, together with a glass of water and called it her 'sleeping-draught.' And then she gave me this—" Piper disclosed a note in her hand. "I didn't want to take it, ma'am—no need for it and far too much—but I saw, if not, she'd be offended. So I did, and she shook hands with me. Told me, too, to thank you again, ma'am. I can't make her out at all."

"Nor I." Mrs. Bickersteth's voice was short. "So now I'll go to bed, Piper."

CHAPTER XV

But in the morning she understood.

Through the rain she went to her bath. It was still pouring when she returned, without a glimpse of Mrs. Verney. The porter was nowhere to be seen, but Piper was standing on the steps, evidently watching for her. At the first sight of her face, Mrs. Bickersteth guessed there was fresh trouble.

"What is it?" She clutched Piper's arm as she got out of the omnibus. "Not bad news—a telegram?"

"No, ma'am. Everything's right at home." Piper drew her on to the pavement under the glass roof of the porch. "It's here, ma'am—Mrs. Verney. I shall have to tell you quickly, as the manager is waiting to see you. But, oh, do be careful with him. She's gone, poor lady, died in her sleep."

Mrs. Bickersteth gasped.

"Oh, Piper!"

"Yes'm. They think it was her heart." Piper looked over her shoulder quickly and spoke in a whisper: "But I've my doubts. They've been questioning me, but I kept my head. Don't say *nothink* about those cachets. You'll remember, ma'am?"

Her mistress nodded. She was too horrified to speak. Piper went on breathlessly:

"We've got to think of poor Miss Verney. And it's bad enough as it is! I was the last to see her alive. But

they won't get nothink out of me." Her lined face looked defiant. "And they don't want no scandal, neither. But Miss Verney's got to be found. That's why the manager's waiting for you, though I said as you didn't know."

Apparently he would wait no longer, for, as she whispered, he appeared suspiciously on the top step and frowned down at the maid.

"I'd better go in." Mrs. Bickersteth braced herself for the ordeal.

Little was said until she reached the private room at the back of the Office. The manager offered her a chair. Mrs. Bickersteth, rigid, took it. She was thankful that he could speak English, and she listened as he unfolded the story of how the chambermaid had knocked, received no response and returned later, to find Mrs. Verney asleep, as she had thought. Then the terrible revelation.

It was evident that the manager was both nervous and exasperated. He kept on twisting his plump, white hands and darting sharp glances at her. He regarded it, obviously, as an insult to his hotel. An old lady, highly respected, left to die on his hands! And at Bagnoles there were no deaths. Not among the visitors. It was unheard of—a disaster! In the middle of the season too. Not even a maid in charge of her, and where was Miss Verney? That was another mystery! She must be found—he threw out his hands—and at once! He had questioned Mme. la Comtesse de Mesnil and learnt that Miss Verney was supposed to be staying at some Villa. He paused interrogatively. Mrs. Bickersteth nodded her head.

"So I understood from her mother, but I don't know the name."

"A Villa in Bagnoles?"

"I have no idea."

At that moment there came a knock at the door.

"Entrez!" the manager rapped out, and the porter appeared on the threshold. "Eh bien?"

The porter, triumphant, poured out his news. He had found the driver of the *fiacre* employed by Miss Verney when she left the hotel. She had driven direct to Couterne station where he had helped to take down the luggage. This was the sum of his information, but possibly the porters knew more.

"Couterne? Excuse me, madame." The manager pounced on the telephone and demanded a number. "Hállo . . . hállo!" He asked for the station-master.

Mrs. Bickersteth held her breath. Was that the line to Mont St. Michel?

A rapid conversation followed, the description of the missing lady and a pause whilst the harassed man held the receiver to his ear and glared across at the window. Then a name broke from his lips:

"Domfront? . . . A first-class ticket to Domfront? . . . Si . . . c'est ça! Merci, monsieur." He rang off, frowning, and returned to his victim. Did Madame know if Miss Verney had friends in a Villa at Domfront?

Know? Full well she knew! The truth had broken in on her. Again she heard Sir Raphael speaking to Trench in the sunny garden. Fragments floated up in her mind of the final conversation: "If I were a man of your age . . . the *Champsecret*—and Paradise!"

They were there, the errant lovers! But how could she

betray their secret? She must screen them. Thrusting reason from her, she embarked on pure romance.

"Domfront? Of course! How stupid of me. But the shock took my wits away. It must be those friends whom we met there on the day we had lunch together." She was inventing desperately, amazed by the calm sound of her voice.

The manager's face relaxed. He drew a sheet of paper to him and jerked a pencil out of his pocket.

"And their address, madame?"

"Ah, that's the trouble!" She actually smiled. "I've a bad memory for names. But I'm sure I could find the house again. It stood back—not far from the walls." She rose to her feet. "That's the best plan! If you can let me have a car, I'll go and fetch Miss Verney myself and break the terrible news to her."

The manager heartily agreed to the proposition. His manner changed, once more deferential. It would be an errand of charity. Poor young lady! Nevertheless, Mrs. Verney should not have been left alone, at her age, with a weak heart. Which reminded him—his face altered; he knit his brows—there was another serious matter. He was speaking now in confidence. The doctor who had been called in was anxious to know what had been the contents of a little box by her bedside bearing an English chemist's label. Unfortunately it was empty. Was it possible that the deceased had taken an overdose of some morphine preparation? Such things had occurred before. He believed Mrs. Bickersteth's maid had helped the poor lady to bed. The doctor had questioned her, but—

Mrs. Bickersteth interrupted him, her loyalty up in arms at the new note in the manager's voice.

"My maid knows nothing. But I can tell you. Mrs. Verney frequently took some cachets—a sedative—when she required them. A harmless dose, so her daughter told me, of bromide and bismuth, to calm her nerves. The chemist in England would confirm this. Or, no doubt, we could find the prescription."

She saw the other's intense relief. Above everything, he dreaded a scandal. The affair would be hushed up.

"Is that all?" As he bowed his thanks, she sailed out, her head high, her heart like ice. "I shall be ready in ten minutes," she told him severely at the lift. "When I return with Miss Verney I shall *rely* on you to spare her all you can. Then we must wire for her relations."

Piper was waiting in the passage. She gave her mistress one glance and hurried her along to her room. Here Mrs. Bickersteth collapsed, safe behind the locked door. It was good to have the relief of tears and Piper's loving sympathy.

"I've saved them"—she wiped her eyes—"but I've had to tell some shocking untruths. Still, my heart ached for those poor young people. Oh, what a dreadful punishment, Nanna! And how Mrs. Verney must have suffered. For it wasn't an accident. I knew that when he said it was empty. The box, I mean. It must have been through a sudden loss of sanity. She couldn't live without her daughter!" She looked up at the old nurse and was surprised at her expression, grim and uncompromising. "What is it? You don't agree with me?"

"No, ma'am. She did it to punish them. It was all thought out and that I should know. I can see her now, counting those cachets and explaining that *one* was the dose. She said she'd never give her consent, and she hasn't! But she's come between them. In a way, it's her victory. For I doubt if, after this, Miss Verney will marry Mr. Trench."

"But she *must!*" Mrs. Bickersteth was confounded. "And besides, she needn't know the truth. We must be careful to keep it from her. The manager will say nothing. You mark my words, they'll hush it up. I could read it in his face. They've every excuse. It will be 'heart failure'."

"Miss Verney will guess," Piper persisted. "Ah, she was a clever one—though I'll say nothing against the dead. But it's best for you to be prepared." She lowered her voice mysteriously. "I had a look at the old lady and she wasn't as I left her last night. She'd done her hair and pinned on her curls and her hands were folded on her breast. She makes a beautiful corpse, ma'am, as she meant to—there's no doubt of it! Miss Joceline's photo beside her and even her rings on her fingers. For nobody would rob the dead. It never was a sudden impulse. It was to get her daughter back, as she told you she would, and to-day."

"So she did! I'd forgotten that. Well, Piper, we must do all we can." Mrs. Bickersteth struggled up. "I'm dreading what lies before me. I'd better take my mackintosh."

"We will, ma'am," Piper agreed, and caught her mistress' eye in the glass. "Why, you don't think I'd let you

go alone? Miss Verney might be taken bad and, anyhow, I could sit by the driver. Whilst you're tidying your hair I'll just get my hat and coat on."

She slipped out, to avoid discussion.

As she was fastening her shoe-lace, a sudden happy thought struck her. Those socks! She could put them in her pocket. There might be a chance of returning them, with or without an explanation.

She went to the top drawer, in which she kept her work bag and mending, and turned it upside-down—in vain!

Whatever could she have done with them? Hurriedly she searched the room. Could anything be more provoking? For it might be the last chance of getting in touch with Mr. Trench. He couldn't return to the hotel, for obvious reasons, the main one being that every one placed him at Mont St. Michel. She had seen the socks three days ago, together with those silk stockings that her mistress would buy at a London sale—and "boxrotten," as Piper knew!

Well, it was no good worrying, with all this serious trouble to face. She picked up her umbrella and sallied forth with the conviction that something was "wrong" in this hotel. Piper firmly believed in ghosts. It would be like Mrs. Verney—poor lady—to have spirited those socks away!

It was mournful in the Forêt d'Andaine, with the wet boughs that dripped overhead, but when they emerged it was to find that they had outdistanced the main downpour. The sun stole out from between the clouds, drawing up the heavy moisture and a mist obscured the wonderful view. Above the immense vale, Domfront and her towers were sharp as an etching against the sky, pale blue where the dark curtains had parted, to drape the horizon.

The narrow streets smelt mildewed as they crawled through them, past the Dungeon, and drew up before the main hotel. For this was part of the plan evolved during the lengthy drive. From here they could walk to their destination and keep its secret from the chauffeur and the presence of Trench in the town.

A few drops were still falling. Bulky in her mackintosh, Mrs. Bickersteth took Piper's arm and sheltered under her umbrella. They started forth gallantly.

"If only I can see him first," Mrs. Bickersteth panted, plodding along. "I must ask for him, anyhow. I shouldn't know what to call Miss Verney." A sudden distaste for the sordid side of the adventure overwhelmed her. "I suppose she's known as 'Mrs. Trench'?"

"She would be," said Piper primly. "Mind that big puddle, ma'am."

It seemed an endless expedition, with divers instructions from passers-by, but at last they reached a narrow road and saw before them the little inn with its weather-beaten stones, its crooked roof and mysterious name, Hotel Champsecret, over the door, wide open, like an astonished mouth under the slit eyes of its windows.

The place was deserted at this hour and, failing to find a bell, Mrs. Bickersteth marched in, Piper at her heels, cherishing the damp umbrella.

From a door on the left of the narrow passage came a woman in a blue apron, a knitted cape round her plump

shoulders, with a savoury smell of soup. She greeted them civilly and Mrs. Bickersteth asked for Trench.

The patronne smiled and nodded.

"Monsieur" was in the garden, she thought, though "Madame" had gone upstairs. She opened a farther door and the light streamed in. Shading her eyes, she peered out. Yes, there, on the *terrasse*. She would fetch him. But Mrs. Bickersteth checked her.

"I will go to him myself." She turned to Piper. "You'd better wait here."

The patronne invited her into the kitchen.

Mrs. Bickersteth picked her way across the untidy little garden, picturesque with its unpruned bushes and masses of vivid colour. For, in every cranny of the stones, snapdragon had seeded itself and was in its full glory. At the end of the rough grass was a paved walk, fringing the old town wall, a broken line against the sky with a sense of infinite space beyond. Trench, his back turned to her, leant, his elbows propped on the coping, a pipe in the corner of his mouth, gazing across the wide prospect.

Mrs. Bickersteth's heart beat fast as, hearing her step on the flagstones behind him, he started and wheeled round.

"You!" His face showed surprise and pleasure. How happy he looked, she thought. Then it changed as he hastily tapped out his pipe, thrust it into his pocket and advanced. "But how did you know we were here?"

A covert suspicion was in his glance as he held out his hand to her.

Mrs. Bickersteth took it—unwillingly!

"I guessed." Her honest eyes condemned him. "But I can't go into all that now—you must know what I feel about it. I've no time and there's dreadful trouble. I've come to take Joceline back."

He stiffened.

"She won't go."

"She will"—Mrs. Bickersteth faced him sternly—
"when she knows that her mother died last night."

"What?" He stared blankly at her. Then the full meaning reached him and the blood receded from his face. "My God!" She heard him mutter under his breath: "Dead? That puts the lid on!"

Because it had been Dicky's favourite expression in moments of disillusion, Mrs. Bickersteth's heart went soft as wax.

"It's true." Her voice faltered now.

"Oh, my poor Joceline!" The cry was wrung from him. "This will finish her. And we were so happy!" As though he could not bear the light, he put a hand up over his eyes. "One minute!" he said huskily.

Patient, she waited, filled with a pity that blotted out her desire to preach. Youth seemed suddenly so help-less—at the mercy of the Spring. She found herself unexpectedly thinking: "It's because they weren't allowed to marry. They haven't had a fair chance."

Oliver's hand fell to his side. He looked at her, his jaw set, every muscle in his body taut.

"Now, please tell me everything." But before she could start, he asked a question: "I suppose it was heart, after all?"

"I'm afraid not. Intentional." She saw him recoil

under the blow. "But we must keep this to ourselves. Above all, from Joceline's knowledge." She glanced back at the hotel. "Can she see us from the windows?"

"Yes." He pulled himself together. "Let's go to that arbour. She's upstairs, changing her clothes. We went out early and got soaked."

He moved, Mrs. Bickersteth beside him, to a brokendown retreat, the home of innumerable spiders, that filled the angle of the terrace. There was a bench across it and the bushes shielded them from the inn.

Here she told him the whole story, watching the youth die out of his face and marvelling at his control. For, even in his despair, he gripped the main possibilities, questioning her when she faltered and showing his deep gratitude for her efforts on their behalf.

"I can't thank you," he said at the end. "You're the best woman I've ever met." He looked her straight between the eyes. "Will you stand by Joceline still?"

"I will." She put a hand over his and pressed it. "That's understood. And now you must tell her, Oliver. Gradually—not all at once. Say first that her mother is ill. But, in case we don't get another chance, I want to impress this on you: you must go off to Mont St. Michel. At once. It's the only way."

"Must I? Couldn't I stay here?" He pleaded with her, hollow-eyed. "It's nearer and we could meet."

"No." She shook her head gravely. "There's enough gossip already. The whole hotel is wondering. You must send her luggage back by train—we shall walk to the car—pay your bill and slip away. I want you to post me a card to-night, as soon as you reach Mont St.

Michel, with your new address on it, for all the hotel to read. Just the usual friendly message. That will divert suspicion, as you're not supposed to know of the death. But you can write to Joceline. And after the funeral—" She broke off. "I don't know—I can't look ahead. Anyhow, we can meet in Paris. At present, we must think of her—of safeguarding her reputation."

"You're right." He rose to his feet, but hesitated, his face working. "God knows how I shall break it!"

Before she could answer, he wheeled off.

She watched him cross the uneven grass, pass through the doorway and vanish from sight. Her troubled eyes sought the windows above, then dropped, as a vision of the room materialized in her mind. How wrong it was —but how *sad!* The punishment seemed extreme.

At this moment a spider crawled over her hands, which were clasped in her lap. She brushed it off, with a touch of horror and, escaping from the arbour, made her way to where Trench had stood, at the lower section of the wall. She leaned on it, as he had done, for the sunshine had dried the stone. Instinctively she drew in her breath, in a sudden fear of the depths below. For the wall was built on naked rock that fell away in a precipice. It made her giddy to look down and she raised her eyes to the view which seemed to embrace all Normandy.

Wave after wave of mist was rolling over the vast plateau, for a light wind had succeeded the rain. It might have been grey ocean, pierced by the spires of submerged churches. In her mood of nervous tension, it seemed to bring home to her the insignificance of man, and, as if to heighten the impression, the vapour parted

and she could see, on the chess-board formed by alternate crops, a moving line of tiny bodies, ant-like, that crawled down a white road, exploring infinity.

Then, through the silence, the thin note of a bugle floated up to her. The line halted, broke its formation and merged into a squad of troops that squatted down on the grass by the road. The thought flashed through her head: "Preparing for another war! France will never be satisfied until—"

She gave herself a shake. This was sheer morbidity. Sorrow there was in the world, but there was also happiness. Youth, love, and high endeavour. Now, as the mists rolled away, she could appreciate the beauty of the fertile country, under a heaven that still, to her, was but a veil, hiding God's face.

Long she leaned on the warm wall, drinking in the air and sunshine, planning, clearing the way before her. In ten days she would go to Paris. With Joceline. They could be married there. She would see them right in the eyes of the world.

She started, for a door had slammed in the still house behind her. As she turned, she saw Trench emerge. She went a few paces to meet him, aware of fresh tragedy. For his face looked tortured and hopeless. He did not speak and she broke the strain:

"How did she take it? Is she bad? Would you like me to go to her?"

"No—not yet." He drew her back to the terrace. "She hasn't cried. She seems—frozen." He met Mrs. Bickersteth's pitiful eyes and broke out bitterly, "But she's done with me! As her mother intended."

"Oh, my dear!" She was trembling. "It's the shock. She doesn't really mean it. So unexpected. It's natural."

"No. Mrs. Verney has got her back." He clenched his hands. "There was always that chance. Joceline says that we've killed her. She was quite just. She blames herself. But it's over." She heard his teeth grit. He stared out into the sunshine. "God knows I did my best, but she guessed what had happened from the start. Just said: 'She's dead! It's our doing.' And besides"—he brought his hand down on the wall with such force that it cut the skin—"she's got some extraordinary idea that there's a way of reparation. Some religious idea that this was 'planned'! I can't make head or tail of it! But it's her show—I drop out. She told me that if I loved her I could prove it by going away for ever."

"For a time," Mrs. Bickersteth corrected, in her most soothing voice. "You will have to do that, in any case. And give her a chance to recover. But it will all come right in the end. You mustn't despair. Leave her to me. And—I don't mean this unkindly—let her miss you, realize what she's lost."

"You think so?" He caught at the straw.

"I do," said Mrs. Bickersteth firmly. "I quite expected this. The reaction. It's made her hysterical. Girls are often like that. And besides, naturally, she wants to think of her mother now. It's only right that she should. You will have to be patient, my dear boy. What is she doing?"

"She's finishing her packing. She wouldn't let me help her. All she wants is to be alone." "But Piper could have seen to that."

"Is she here?" He seemed to awake to the outside world again, relieved by the way this wise old friend had met the case, his hope reviving. "I'd like to thank her too. Lord, what a time you're in for!" he groaned. "And I can do nothing." He ground his heel into the pavement and suddenly saw that his hand was bleeding. Impatiently, he pulled out a handkerchief and rubbed it. "Don't forget Thring. He'll help you, and he's clever."

"There!" Mrs. Bickersteth's face brightened. "I had forgotten him. Now, let me tie that up for you." She took possession of his hand and effected a rough bandage. "But of course we shall wire for Joceline's relations. Supposing"—she frowned at Trench—"that she wants to take the body home?"

"Then I shall come straight back to England. You'll let me know everything?"

"I promise you that. But, in return, give me your word that you'll stay away? Anyhow, until after the funeral?" He hesitated, then made up his mind.

"All right. So long as she isn't ill, or should send for me herself." He muttered, "Though that isn't likely!" Mrs. Bickersteth was satisfied.

"I shall write to you every day," she told him. "Is there anything else? Let me think." She closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them with a start. "Yes! Oliver, you've never told me what Mrs. Verney said? I can't ask Joceline now and I think I ought to know." The old thrill swept through her of baffled curiosity.

"'Said'?" His thoughts had been wandering, his gaze fixed on an upper window.

"Yes!" Mrs. Bickersteth was impatient. "When she wouldn't give her consent to the match. The reason—what she told those men?"

"Oh, that!" His voice was dull. "She said—" He broke off. "Here she is!"

Mrs. Bickersteth swallowed a certain word forbidden at Torlish Manor. For Trench had already deserted her.

Joceline was coming over the grass, slender in a dark serge frock, her dressing-bag in her hand. She walked like a woman in a trance, expressionless, her eyes wide, deeply blue in her colourless face. But, as Trench reached her, she swerved past him, evading his intention, as though she could brook no delay.

He fell into step at her side, nonplussed, and tried to relieve her of her burden. As their hands met, the onlooker, keenly alive to the situation, saw her recoil. Trench desisted.

"My poor child!" Mrs. Bickersteth hurried forward, all thought of blame swept from her heart at the sight of that frozen face.

Her motherly arms were outstretched, but Joceline did not bend her head to receive the generous kiss. Her body was stiff in the other's embrace.

"I'm ready," she said stonily.

"Yes, dear." Mrs. Bickersteth sighed. "Then we'll go. I'll just find Piper, whilst you say good-bye to Oliver."

"I've said good-bye."

The words fell, measured, like the toll of a passing-bell. Mrs. Bickersteth chose to ignore them. Turning her back on the pair, she hurried to the house.

At her step in the passage, Piper appeared.

"I'm here, ma'am."

"We're going now." Mrs. Bickersteth, conscious of the door leading into the kitchen beyond, put a finger to her lip. "I think I'll take off my mackintosh."

Piper, in silence, helped her, but her old eyes asked a question.

"Bad," Mrs. Bickersteth whispered. "She hasn't broken down at all. Still, perhaps it's just as well until we get her out of this place."

"And him?" Piper asked guardedly.

But Mrs. Bickersteth had turned. She was looking down the garden. There was trouble on her face.

Joceline, head erect, still lost in some terrible vision, was making her way back. In the sunshine, against the spring growth and the brilliant patches that clung to the walls, she struck a note of tragedy that went to the old nurse's heart.

"Tck, tck!" she clucked under her breath as she folded the mackintosh over her arm. "And him, all alone!"

For Trench stood, his back to the terrace, like a figure turned to stone. Only his grey eyes seemed alive, following—following Joceline . . .

CHAPTER XVI

Bickersteth decided, she could never have got through the days that followed. He had taken the main burden on his own capable shoulders, aware of the need for haste, for no hotel cares to harbour the dead. Joceline's only maternal relations were her widowed aunt and cousin, but the former was ill with influenza and her daughter could not leave her. Telegrams came pouring in and eventually a Colonel Verney, Joceline's uncle, arrived from Scotland. Beyond taking his niece to the funeral, he was too late to be of much use—though in time to cavil at arrangements! An ex-cavalry officer, accustomed to rule his womenfolk, he resented Joceline's opposition to his opinion that the coffin should be conveyed to England for interment in the family vault.

Her mother had always loved France and once, in an illness in Mentone, had expressed the hope that the country endeared to her by her girlhood should be her last resting-place. The memory of this had settled Joceline's remaining doubts.

Now, at last, it was over. Mrs. Bickersteth relaxed her efforts, with that curious, dulled sense of peace which even the nearest and dearest must feel when the last rites and the last honours have been paid to the mortal shell from which the spirit has departed. She could breathe again, with a sense of reprieve; no scandal had attached itself to

the memory of the dead or the reputation of the living. Her plan, backed by Sir Raphael's forethought, his authority and command of the language, had succeeded beyond her expectations.

Colonel Verney had gone back to his interrupted fishing, frigid and exasperated, for Joceline had refused to accompany him to England. She left her affairs in his hands as trustee for her parent, but showed no interest in them. She was dominated by one desire: to return to the Convent and Mary Gringold.

On the drive back from Domfront, her stony composure had given way. She had sobbed on Mrs. Bickersteth's shoulder, accusing herself of being the cause of her mother's unforeseen collapse. Since then, there had been no tears, save those she shed in secret. The habit of repression, strengthened by the long years, helped her to conceal her grief, but she found an outlet for emotion in religious mysticism. Only by solitary repentance, the negation of her love for Trench, could she make reparation. She would enter the Roman Church and devote her life to its service and its beautiful prayers for the dead.

Mrs. Bickersteth could not shake Joceline's resolution. Her motherly heart ached for Trench when she read his despairing letters. It was no use his coming to Bagnoles, with the girl in her present state. Far better to wait and meet in Paris when her own cure was over and she would make a last effort to bring the divided pair together.

Joceline had written to him once. It was a letter of farewell. But Trench would not accept her decision. He steeled himself to be patient.

His latest move had been to leave Mont St. Michel for

Paris. He had wired his address there this morning and the telegram lay, with her knitting, on Mrs. Bickersteth's broad lap as she sat on the balcony. She had lunched with Joceline in the private sitting room which had been Lady Carnedin's, taken for her by Sir Raphael the moment he had heard the news. He had overcome the manager's objection that it was reserved for expected guests by engaging the whole suite. Piper slept in the dressing-room, to be near the girl at night. Already workmen were employed in papering the apartment where Mrs. Verney had played her last trump in the game of tyrannical possession which she dignified by the name of love.

Yes, she had won! Mrs. Bickersteth agreed with Trench in his bitter summing-up. Only one consolation remained: Joceline had not guessed the truth. She had accepted the doctor's verdict, confirmed by the discovery of a second box of cachets, undoubtedly of the kind Mrs. Bickersteth had described. There was no need for an autopsy and an added shock to the hotel. The manager was too shrewd to awaken suspicion in the girl's mind when she arrived, broken-hearted, from Domfront.

Now Joceline was only waiting for a reply from the Convent to settle the hour of her departure. Mrs. Bickersteth felt hopeless as she gazed out over the parched grass.

"Once they get her, they'll keep her," she thought, "if only for the sake of her money. Yes, the priests will see to that! I expect they'll be Jesuits. The people who say that to tell a lie in a good cause is acceptable to God!"

She shrugged her shoulders scornfully and proceeded to wipe her damp brow. Really, the waters were too try-

seemed oppressive. The tennis-court scintillated under the glare of the sun and the sky held a tinge of copper. For a thin veil lay across it. Not a leaf in the garden stirred. Even the little French girls had desisted from their games and were sitting on the grass with a doll and picture book, whilst the boy sprawled, full length, and read. Behind them, their mother was sorting her threads, preparatory to an onslaught on another square of linen destined for casement blinds.

How thrifty they were, Mrs. Bickersteth thought. They rarely sat with idle hands. Even that elderly aristocrat, Mme. de Mesnil, would appear, a bag slung from one arm by a bright knot of ribbon, and extract a neat little roll of lace to which she was constantly adding, with complicated knots and stitches between the braids tacked to a strip of supple American cloth. The Countess had been good to Joceline. She had offered to take her back to their château in Périgord where she could have the seclusion she needed and the comfort and advice of the old family priest.

Always the same story, Mrs. Bickersteth decided, that of religious propaganda! She was glad Joceline had declined the reiterated invitation. In Paris there might be a chance for Trench, with patience and perseverance.

But Mme. de Mesnil had other views. She proposed visiting Jean's parents, who lived in a narrow, gloomy old house in the Faubourg St. Germain. The Convent would do, for an interval. If Joceline adopted her own faith, it would pave the way to that alliance which she desired now more than ever. What a fortune, juste ciel!

Mrs. Bickersteth, unaware of this, drowsily began to plan, her eyes fixed on the lake, hypnotized by the water.

She was aroused from her dreams by a sound behind her.

"Is that you, Piper?" She turned her head and the old maid came to the window. "I suppose it's nearly the hour for my drive. I must go and see Miss Verney first." She rose and mechanically held out the knitting and telegram. "I'm hoping she will come with me. A little air is what she needs." She stepped up into the room and was moving to the door when there came a tap on it. "Entrez!" she cried, surprised, and Joceline appeared on the threshold.

White-faced and repressed, in her straight black frock, the hair brushed back from her temples, she might already have been a nun, save for the sombre veil.

Mrs. Bickersteth, with an effort, greeted her cheerfully:

"Oh, there you are! Just as I was thinking of you." She disclosed her plan. "Such a lovely afternoon. It would be nice in the forest."

"I don't think I must—now." The girl took a step forward. "Though it's sweet of you. But you're always so kind." With a sudden impulse, rare of late, she laid a hand on the other's arm and pressed it. "How I shall miss you! I'm off to-morrow. I've just had a letter from the Convent."

"To-morrow?" Mrs. Bickersteth was startled. "Oh, dear! And I can't let—" She pulled herself up, but Joceline divined her intention.

"You mustn't. I know what you were thinking. It's no good. That's—over. I want him to go away and for-

get me." She added slowly, "I'm not going to give him my address," and saw her companion start.

"But you'll give it to me?" Mrs. Bickersteth sounded frightened. "I should be very hurt if you didn't. How am I to find you in Paris?"

Joceline smiled faintly.

"You mustn't be hurt. I will tell you. But you must keep it a secret from—him." She went on in the voice that had lost its youthful resonance, "It may sound cruel, but it isn't. I've made up my mind. Nothing can change me. So what is the use of another meeting that would only break his heart?"

"And yours." Mrs. Bickersteth's eyes were shrewd.

Joceline, despite her control, flinched.

They had both of them forgotten Piper, discreet, at the other end of the room, but the old nurse was watching the girl.

"That can't be helped." She saw Mrs. Bickersteth's scepticism and checked the threatened argument. "I mustn't waste time. There's my packing to finish. I've sent a wire to say I'm coming and I'm off by the early train. It's better so. Here I feel—" She bit her lip, aware that the tears were not far from her eyes.

"But, dear, you must give me your address?" Mrs. Bickersteth persisted.

"Only if you'll—spare him?"

The harassed lady made up her mind.

"Very well. For the present. So long as you promise to come and see me as soon as I arrive in Paris?"

She knew of old the girl's obstinacy and she dared not lose trace of her.

"I'll do that," said Joceline simply. She prayed that, by then, her future life might be settled. Irrevocable. It would give her strength. "I'll come to your hotel, with Mary."

"That's right." Mrs. Bickersteth already was making fresh plans. Oliver there—a surprise! She came back to the present. "Couldn't Piper pack for you?"

"It's very kind, but I'd sooner do it. I shall send most of the luggage home."

Mrs. Bickersteth nodded. She realized that Joceline wanted to be alone, faced with those saddest of sad relics, the garments worn by the dead.

"Then we'll meet this evening, dear. Would you like me to dine with you, as usual?"

"Oh, please do? Our last night together." As if to put a final ban on argument, she added quickly, "But I shall go to bed early."

"Yes, you must." Mrs. Bickersteth watched her depart and turned, with a sigh, to see Piper, waiting. "Oh, you're there! I suppose you heard? It's a bad business, Nanna. I begin to despair for that poor boy."

"I'm not so sure," said the old nurse briskly. "Did you see how she couldn't say his name? She's beginning to get over the shock. Now, ma'am, your hat." She handed it. "And don't you go grieving. I've a notion things will come right yet. She's one of them that goes to extremes. First she runs away with a man, and then she wants to be a nun! Perhaps it's from being kept down so long, poor young lady—though I'm sure I don't know which is worst! And she mayn't find the Convent all it was. She's for-

gotten the bad days there, as we all do when we think of our childhood. But I wish she hadn't all that money."

"Ah, that's my fear! They'll be after it."

"They will." Piper's thin lips snapped. "Your hat isn't straight, ma'am," she said severely. Mrs. Bickersteth turned again to the glass and remedied the error. "That's better. And your gloves?"

She buttoned them and produced a sunshade.

Mrs. Bickersteth sailed forth. She preferred to be alone for the drive. There was not only Joceline's future, but Elsie's, on her mind. Aware of the tragedy in which his wife was involved, the Squire of Torlish had insisted on the discussion being waived until their approaching visit to Paris. Far better to talk things over. There was no hurry, he explained—in the teeth of Elsie's furious objection! Why couldn't "the mater" leave strangers alone and attend to her own family? All this nonsense about love when what England needed was work. Just like mother, match-making again! And a nice mess she'd got into this time!

She wrote to Piper secretly and received a tart letter in reply, that weakened a shade at the end. The last of her children—and the dearest! Piper was loyal to her mistress, but a vision of keeping house at the farm, Miss Elsie under her own wing, rose and haunted her waking hours.

She tidied the room and, once again, searched in the linen drawer. No, the socks were not there. The valet de chambre must have stolen them. And there was a handkerchief missing too, one of the best ones, a present

from Miss Christabel. Piper sighed. She must have another hunt for it, but first she must go out for the cakes. The shop would be full later on and no one pleasant or willing to serve her. Talk about the French being courteous! Why, their tempers flared up at the slightest touch and then how they shrieked at you and flapped their hands in your face! Almost as if they wanted to fight you. Dangerous too, with those pointed nails.

It was stifling in the town. Dark clouds were gathering fast and Piper looked up at the sky, a tight hand on her purchases. A motor shot round the corner by Guyot's, raising a cloud of dust. As she was getting it out of her eyes, the storm broke overhead. First a vivid flash of lightning and, without a pause, the thunder, then the rain, lashing down, arrows that beat on the dusty pavement.

An umbrella was very little protection. Piper saw that she would be soaked before she could reach the hotel. Across the road, a pair of women were hurrying up the steps of a church. They reached the door, drew the leather curtain aside and vanished. Piper followed them.

Although she would not have confessed it and was always "brave" before her children, she was inwardly afraid of lightning. It was safer to be under cover. She made her way breathlessly into the dim interior.

It was her first experience of a Roman Catholic place of worship and she looked round her, apprehensive, yet filled with curiosity. She felt herself conspicuous in the open space near the door. On tiptoe, she stole up the side aisle with a sense of intrusion for, here and there, was a solitary figure kneeling, and the faint click of a rosary

broke the tense silence between the thunder that echoed in the lofty roof.

She came at last to a little chapel, lit by a feeble lamp, void of windows and deserted. Here was an ideal refuge. Gathering courage, she sat down on one of the chairs at the back. Such a queer, low chair with a shelf on the top! Still, rather comfortable, if you sat with your feet well apart. Her thoughts turned to her mistress. An open carriage and all those trees! Piper was worrying.

Presently a lady entered, genuflected, and knelt down on the pavement before the altar. There was something so brisk in her movements that Piper felt a forbidden amusement, watching her bowed head jerk to the rattle of her beads; then the swift way she crossed herself, rose to her feet, bent the knee again and prepared for departture. It was like some business transaction!

As she turned to go, Piper saw a handkerchief lying on the floor, unrealized by the owner. Habit, too strong for the old nurse, sent her forward to retrieve it.

"Your handkerchief, ma'am." She had picked it up. "Mine?" The lady, surprised, took it. "So it is! Thank you so much."

An Englishwoman? Piper smiled.

"A pity to lose it, ma'am," she responded.

"Yes. Though it should be safe here." Her lowered voice was both friendly and gay.

Piper missed the intention.

"It ought to be, in a church, ma'am. But one never knows," she said darkly.

"I meant," the lady explained more fully, "safe in dear St. Anthony's keeping. This chapel is dedicated to him." Piper stiffened. She had followed the other's glance to where a figure, in painted plaster, dingy and with a chipped nose, dominated the crowded altar, with its paper flowers and silvered tributes. A "graven image"! Why had she come here? She mumbled something and tried to escape.

Unluckily, the lady before her was a recent "convert," filled with the zeal of those born in another faith. She saw in Piper a "soul to save."

She patted the row of chairs by her side.

"Let's sit down and I'll tell you about him."

Piper was forced to submit. She could find no excuse on the spur of the moment except a feeble: "I mustn't be long, ma'am," lost in a violent clap overhead.

"St. Anthony," said the lady, as if she were talking to a child, "is the Saint who finds things when they're lost."

She poured it all out into Piper's ear as the thunder came in shattering volleys and the old nurse listened, her nerves on edge. After all, it was company and the church might be struck any moment! Against her will, she was interested when she heard that "the blessed St. Anthony" had once brought home a strayed lap-dog. He certainly wasn't ornamental, but he seemed to lead a useful life.

"I see, ma'am," she said at last, when the lady paused for breath. "An offering and then he finds it?"

"And prayer," said the lady urgently. She started, as through a sudden silence came the booming note of the clock, beating down from the tower. "I must go!"

Rising from the outside seat, she freed the helpless victim, and said farewell with a kind smile.

She had sown the good seed; she would leave it to work in the tough soil of that heretic heart.

It still thundered at intervals, though the storm was moving towards the hills. Piper waited, listening. She was battling with a secret temptation. After all, there was the line in *her* creed about the "Communion of Saints," though she couldn't remember St. Anthony among those certified by the prayer-book. It might be worth it—and no one would know! She opened her worn, black purse and examined the contents. A ten-franc note and three sous. You could hardly offer a Saint coppers? Then she remembered!

In the flap was an English sixpence, wrapped in paper. She took it out and looked at it. *Would* it be wrong? She thought of the minister at home, and suddenly made up her mind. She couldn't stand the minister's wife! And she wasn't going to be patronized. This wasn't England; it was France.

She rose and, approaching the altar, gazed up at St. Anthony. He looked kind and rather humble. Piper laid her offering down, close to his sandalled feet.

"I'm not going to kneel to you," she said. "It doesn't seem right. You understand? But here's sixpence and I'll be glad if you'll find those socks for me?"

It was done! There was no turning back. Piper fled, as an ancient crone shuffled in, with that flat, religious tread which is the same all over the world, and gave her a suspicious glance, moving to a little stand with spikes and impaled candles.

The old nurse drew a breath of relief when she found herself on the steps outside. The rain had ceased and in the air was the smell of moist earth and the incense of leaves, washed free from their burden of dust. She must get home and have a hunt for the missing handkerchief. A pity she hadn't included it in her request to St. Anthony. Still, sixpence wasn't very much?

She put the plan into execution as soon as she reached her mistress' room. She went through every drawer methodically, and every pocket, and finally looked under the bed. No use—it was gone!

On the counterpane was lying Mrs. Bickersteth's knitting-bag. Piper's gaze fell on it.

"That'ud be just like her," she thought, an indulgent twinkle in her eye.

She picked it up, loosened the strings and shook out the contents. The first object to bounce on the *duvet* was—she gave a sharp exclamation—a tightly rolled pair of socks!

The socks . . . St. Anthony!

Piper collapsed on a chair, for her legs felt absurdly shaky. Quick work! Who would have thought it? Of course she ought to have looked there before—this idea, somehow, was comforting. Piper, superstitious, had a nervous horror of "black magic." But what ought she to do now? Thank him. It was only proper. She closed her eyes for a moment and hoped he wouldn't think her grudging. Then she prepared for action. She would send off the socks at once and write a letter to explain. Wouldn't Mr. Trench be pleased!

His address was on the telegram which she had placed on the writing-table. Everything she needed was there and her mistress wouldn't mind. She could use the hotel paper. She sat down to her task and laboriously evolved the missive. She belonged to the old class, now fast dying out, that places scholastic attainment second to a knowledge of work. She was invariably baffled by the right use of "has" and "as" and the place to put a capital, but this did not really trouble her. For few could beat her at her task, which was to turn out into the world children healthy in body and mind. Her instincts were unimpaired; her ability strengthened by concentration: a point at times overlooked by a generation apt to lose sight of the main object of education. Namely, to prepare the young for the battle of life and not to provide them with a smattering of knowledge spread over so wide a field that half of it must be dumped overboard when the ship sails out of harbour. What she knew, she knew thoroughly. She wasn't "expected to be a scholar." So, when the letter was finished she read it through, well-pleased.

Then a happy thought struck her. She picked up the pen again and added a short postscript. He would like to know that, poor young man!

She placed the page with the socks in a parcel, glanced at the clock anxiously and, once more, resumed her outdoor clothes. The post office was near at hand.

As she hurried down the road, she noticed that it *felt* "like socks" and decided to register the package. This took time and a heated explanation. Still, it was safer; the French weren't honest. With the receipt in her hand she fled back to the hotel.

As she reached the door, Mrs. Bickersteth drove up.

Piper's heart reproached her. No tea—no kettle boiling! "Are you wet, ma'am?" She helped her mistress down. "I've been worriting about you."

"Oh, no." Mrs. Bickersteth sounded quite cheerful. "I took shelter in a church. Such a quaint little place, called the Chapel of St. Ortaire."

"No, ma'am?" On the tip of the old nurse's tongue rose the words: "So did I!" but she swallowed them. Wiser not. She was longing to know how the socks had "got there," but she was certain that her mistress would not approve of St. Anthony. "I was caught in the storm too," she said, and smiled at her secret thoughts.

CHAPTER XVII

ATE on a May evening, Mrs. Bickersteth arrived in Paris, conscious of a duty performed. She was thankful that the cure was over. Oddly enough, in leaving Bagnoles, she had experienced a touch of regret. Its leafy beauty remained with her, intensified by the contrast of the arid country through which they had passed as the train bore them north; the depopulated air of France, the long, straight roads with their lopped pollards and the fields where, prematurely old, the women bent, tilling the soil.

Everywhere she had divined a harsh struggle for existence; ceaseless thrift and frugality. She wondered if, after all, Torlish were right in its opinion that France was "too grasping" and held "no excuse" for the invasion of the Ruhr.

Meditating in her corner of the empty compartment, she realized how much she had changed in these weeks spent abroad. They had widened her sympathies to an alarming extent. Here she was, Mrs. Bickersteth of Torlish Manor, involved in a case of suicide, screening it from the authorities, and helping deliberately a couple who had transgressed moral laws!

With her unfailing candour, she swept aside the insidious excuse that her interest in the offenders was solely to see them "properly" married. She knew that the romance enchained her. To such an extent that, on the morrow, she was going to a Catholic convent to plead with a prospective nun!

Although she could not exonerate Trench from his share in the adventure, pity had outweighed her judgment. She was grateful to him for the way he had answered her hurried letter on the eve of Joceline's departure from Bagnoles. She felt, in withholding the address, that she had failed the harassed lover.

He had taken it philosophically, somewhat to her surprise, but his latest news puzzled her. It had come in the form of a telegram stating that he was called to England on business, but would return to Paris and see her as soon as she arrived. She hoped that she would find a letter awaiting her at the hotel, and one from Joceline too. For the last five days she had been silent. Mrs. Bickersteth was feeling anxious. Was it the influence of the Convent?

It was good to be in Paris again with its lights and gaiety, its crowded cafés, flowers and hat-shops. Piper too, was well content. This was the half-way-house for home. Mrs. Bickersteth, a true woman, felt a sudden itch for shopping. She would buy Elsie a "Paris hat." The child had been very patient of late—or so her parent fondly imagined—and she deserved a reward.

Piper approved the idea. She loved to see her children smart and admired in the village. She was longing to get back there and to talk about her travels, but she did not regret this week in Paris. It would set the cap on her foreign experience and pave the way with other maids. She had not forgiven Marie yet for suggesting that she was buried alive!

Mrs. Bickersteth's first impression of the hotel in the Cours Albert Premier was dimmed by the driver's rapacity. Happily, the porter spoke English. The manager came forward to greet her; for Lady Carnedin's introduction might lead to another regular client. A maid too. She must be rich. He always went out of his way to make maids comfortable. They dined at his own table. "Equality and Fraternity" paid!

At seven o'clock Mrs. Bickersteth went down to the square room with its glass roof that had once been the courtyard of a nobleman's house. It was built between two wings, with a gallery in one of them, divided from those at table by a screen of plate glass, a dark retreat for the smokers. But the *salle-à-manger* was bright and cheerful and Mrs. Bickersteth approved it.

The food left her indifferent. It had almost an English flavour! There were boiled potatoes with the meat, followed by a baked rice pudding somewhat disguised by caramel. She tasted the latter dubiously—and tried to feel patriotic. Yes, it had come to that!

There was no communication from Trench. This worried her, delaying her plans. But first she must see Joceline. She decided to go early to bed, after a glance in the salon and a cold stare from scattered units of her own countrywomen. It gave her the feeling of having intruded on a dentist's waiting-room. Entrenched behind a paper or book, they sat there, silent sentinels of a race whose charity begins at home—and stays there, through a stubborn shyness.

Mrs. Bickersteth went up in the lift with a cheerful American lady who smiled and remarked that the "elevator" was "terribly small," as they fitted themselves into the seat.

"Yes," said Mrs. Bickersteth coldly, though inwardly surprised and pleased.

When she stepped out of the lift, she bowed—and that ended their acquaintance!

But to-morrow she would have her husband. She could picture him now, midway, under Adela's hospitable roof. How nice it would be to see him again and pour out her adventures into his sympathetic ears. Richard was always content to listen. Sometimes this made life rather dull, as his wife enjoyed conversation at meals and it devolved on herself. Still one couldn't have everything, she thought, and Richard was so "dependable."

"I shan't sleep, in a new bed," she murmured into her pillow, closed her eyes resignedly—and awoke when Piper tapped on the door, with her morning cup of tea!

Mrs. Bickersteth stared at the clock, amazed.

"That's my cure," she decided. "I'm really well. And what a glorious day!"

The light, exciting air of Paris streamed in through the open window. She could see the high boughs of trees that fringed the road where the top-heavy trams were purring past with an intermittent tinkle of bells, and, beyond this, the blue of the Seine and a sparkle of gold and ivory as the sun kissed the nearest bridge.

She lingered pleasantly over her breakfast, the *croissants* and curled pats of butter. In another week she would have to be up and dressed, behind the silver urn—setting a good example! Richard liked her to be with him and to cut her a "thin slice" of ham. He would put the plate

down before her, say: "There, dear," and she would say: "Thank you." For this she rose at seven each morning. Really, the French way seemed better.

"I'm getting demoralized," she thought, and summoned Piper to search for a bath-room.

An hour later they sallied forth. The porter had found them a taxi-auto and issued instructions to the driver, hampered by Mrs. Bickersteth, who decided that the Champs Elysées would be a "short cut" to Passy! He gauged at once the extent of their knowledge and drove direct to the Place de la Concorde, to join in the stream already flowing impetuously to the Étoile. Even Piper admired the width of the road and its avenue of chestnuts, against the white splendour of the buildings bathed in the golden light. Circling round the Arc de Triomphe, they dashed down the Avenue du Bois; then up the Rue Spontini and into a maze of quiet streets, to halt at last before a door in a high and formidable wall.

"This must be it." Mrs. Bickersteth felt a sinking at her heart as she got out, assisted by Piper, and crossed the narrow strip of pavement. "I'd better ring, I suppose?"

She pulled an iron handle that hung from a bar at the side and they heard a bell clang far away with a dull and rusty note. After a pause the sound of steps shuffling down a paved path made Mrs. Bickersteth straighten her hat. But the massive door remained closed.

Suddenly a little shutter on a level with her eyes slid back. Through the bars of a grille she could see a suspicious, wrinkled face that reminded her of a squeezed lemon, so tightly was it nipped in the white linen enclosing it, buttoned under the peaked chin. Above it was the dark hood and, in its shadow, eyes like sloes peered at her inquiringly.

Mrs. Bickersteth, recovering her wits, asked if she could see Miss Verney.

In a still and expressionless voice, the portress explained that Miss Verney had left.

"Left?" Mrs. Bickersteth was confounded. "She can't have left!" She turned to Piper. "They say she's gone. It's a trick, I believe! They don't want me to see her."

"Ask the address, ma'am," Piper prompted.

But the old nun disclaimed the knowledge.

"Then I must see the Mother Superior." Mrs. Bickersteth's voice rose. "I insist on seeing her!"

This was a tactical error. The portress explained that the Reverend Mother was invisible—at her devotions. Madame had better write a letter. Calm and immovable, she began to slide back the little shutter. Mrs. Bickersteth, at the end of her patience, put her fingers through the bars and resisted valiantly.

"Can I speak to Miss Mary Gringold?"

The nun's lips tightened. She resented that gloved hand, interfering with her rights.

Madame was deceiving herself. There was no visitor now at the Convent. The name she mentioned was unknown.

In despair, Mrs. Bickersteth lowered her arm. She heard a click. The shutter had closed!

"Just as I thought! It's a prison. They've got her there under lock and key. Oh, what shall we do, Nanna?"

"I should write, ma'am, as she said." Piper was bitterly aware that the driver was watching them and grinning. "And I'd register the letter. I don't trust that old woman. You're quite sure it's the right address?"

"Quite." Mrs. Bickersteth searched in her bag and produced a scrap of paper. There it was, in Joceline's hand. "I suppose we'd better return home?"

She looked so woebegone that Piper had an inspiration.

"A pity, ma'am, this nice weather. Couldn't we get Miss Elsie's hat?"

"We could." Mrs. Bickersteth sighed. "Oh, dear, I'm so disappointed. Everything's going wrong! I wonder if Mr. Trench is back?"

"Sure to be, soon. *He'll* help us." The old nurse's voice was soothing. "Hadn't we best be starting, ma'am? That taxi's eating money."

They got in and directed the chauffeur to Lady Carnedin's pet hat-shop. But all the joy of Paris had fled. Their worst fears had been realized. Joceline was either hidden there, or sent away to another convent until she had assumed the veil: no one would be allowed to see her whilst all that money hung in the balance.

Piper pinned her hopes on Trench.

"But what can he do?" her mistress wailed.

"There's always the police," said Piper. "They can't spirit her away"—she smiled grimly—"an *Englishwoman!* And Mr. Bickersteth's coming to-day. He's a magistrate. They won't try on any nonsense with him! So you must cheer up, ma'am. He'll expect you to be looking your best."

Mrs. Bickersteth straightened her shoulders.

"Yes, you're right. I mustn't be selfish. Where are we?" She looked about her. "Ah, that must be the Madeleine."

The taxi dived down a side street and drew up with a jerk. Mrs. Bickersteth made calculations and once more fought vainly to keep down expenses.

"I can't see any shop," said Piper.

"It's upstairs. On the first floor. I don't think we'll take the lift," she decided, when they reached it. "It's one of those alone, with buttons."

"Then I shouldn't, ma'am." Piper restrained her.

They walked up, peered through an open door, and ventured in. No one took any notice of them, for all the *vendeuses* were engaged. A chatter of English voices reached them from a group of women trying on hats excitedly before a mirror.

"Let's have a look round first," Mrs. Bickersteth advised, and moved to a centre table filled with millinery on stands. "Nothing here." Her voice was decided. "They look so dull. I want colour—something bright, for Miss Elsie." She sailed on to the window and another tableful of hats. "Now, that's nice!" She selected one. "Such pretty flowers and it looks more trimmed." She balanced the hat on her hand. "I really think I'll try it on. I can judge better on my head."

She proceeded to do so, Piper watching her critically, as she pressed down the hard, brown straw, with its wreath of pink roses fastened by a flat bow.

"Yes, it's pretty. Shady too." Mrs. Bickersteth was pleased. "Though of course it's too young for me. But smart and really Parisian—any one could see that! A

little tight, but it could be stretched." She took it off and looked inside it. "Why, Piper, how extraordinary!"

Amazed, she pointed with her finger. There, on the white lining, in gilt letters was inscribed: D. H. Evans, Oxford St.!

At that moment an angry voice behind them brought the staggering truth home:

"That's mine!"

Mrs. Bickersteth wheeled round, to have the hat snatched from her hand, by one of the Cook's tourists; a tall girl with ruffled hair, in a waterproof coat, a camera strapped across one shoulder and, to balance it, a rope of pearls—too good to be true!

"I'm sorry." Mrs. Bickersteth spoke with dignity. "But I couldn't possibly tell it was yours. It was placed upon a stand."

"You could see that it wasn't new!"

With this parting shot, the owner retreated, with an air of having scored.

"What manners!" fumed Piper. "We'd best go into the other room, ma'am."

They retired, in order. Once out of sight, Mrs. Bickersteth's sense of humour was stirred.

"How absurd!" She chuckled. "You mustn't tell Miss Elsie. I should never hear the last of it, Nanna." She looked round her despairingly. "Really, the hats here are dowdy! I don't think much of this place. I think we'd better go on to the Louvre."

But, at this moment, there entered the room a little lady, dark-haired, with a white face, vivid lips and an amazing allurement. She picked up one of the hats that

had been condemned as "dowdy," drew it, from the nape of her neck, forward onto her sleek head, gave it a poke on one side, patted the curls on her cheekbones, opened her bag, drew out a lip-stick, dabbed it on her pursed mouth, peered at the effect in the glass and murmured throatily: "Très bien!"

And so it was!

Mrs. Bickersteth, hypnotized, nudged Piper.

"That's the one—if she doesn't take it! I can just see Miss Elsie in it."

Fortune favoured them. The elegant Parisian lost her heart to another hat, equally "untrimmed," which, on her head underwent the same magical transformation. A vendeuse appeared and they talked—how they talked! Eventually the customer powdered her face and went away, wearing the second choice. Mrs. Bickersteth secured the first.

All the way home she had qualms. Would Elsie like it? It "looked nothing" and yet it had been more expensive than her mother deemed possible.

What a morning! She felt exhausted by the time they reached the hotel, with the crowded pavements, the halts at shop-windows, and the nervous strain of crossing the roads.

"After lunch you'd best lay down," Piper ordered in the lift. "Then you'll be feeling rested, ma'am, by the time Mr. Bickersteth arrives. Or he'll think the cure's done you no good."

There was craft in the familiar suggestion. If her mistress slept—as she would—she'd forget about those young

people. For Piper had inquired at the office and there was no message from Trench.

Mrs. Bickersteth sat in the empty salon, reading an English magazine which she had found on the table, between excursions to the window every time that a taxi drew up. She became absorbed in a story with a strong vein of romance.

The door opened. She raised her eyes, to see the well-remembered figure, surveying her with a quiet smile.

"Why, Richard!" She struggled up. "I never heard you arrive! How are you? A good crossing?" Happiness flooded her at his kiss and the familiar, peaty smell of his old travelling coat. "You're thinner!" She stared up at him.

"So are you."

"No?" She was pleased. "That's the baths and exercise."

"But you're looking well." He patted her arm. "I've brought a little surprise for you."

"I'm the surprise," said a gay young voice, and, round the half-open door, came a laughing, sun-burnt face, with short brown hair, hazel eyes, and a wide, clean mouth like a school-boy's, twisted in a mischievous grin.

"Elsie!" Mrs. Bickersteth could hardly credit her senses. "My dear child!" She enfolded her daughter in what was known at Torlish Manor as "the mater's bunnyhug."

Elsie submitted—and escaped.

"I worried father until he brought me!"

"Ah, now we have the truth at last." Mr. Bickersteth's grey eyes twinkled. "She pretended it was to look after me."

"Well, you needed it!" Elsie retorted. She caught her mother's amused expression and explained succinctly. "I only left him for five minutes whilst I went down to change my money and when I got back to the deck, there he was, deep in a conversation with the prettiest woman on the boat!"

Mrs. Bickersteth looked from one face to the other and chuckled.

"Oh, Richard!"

"She's exaggerating," he told her calmly. "The lady's cloak caught on my chair. She was walking up and down with her husband. One of those knitted ones, you know, and it took time to get it free as, unluckily, there was a nail."

"Of course it took time." Elsie rejoiced. "Pretty work!"

"Come, come!" The Squire frowned. "We're keeping your mother standing. You'd better go up and see your room."

"We'll all go up," his wife told him. "Piper is making you some tea. I thought you'd like it after your journey. What's this?" She looked at a parcel which he had drawn from his deep coat pocket and was holding out to her.

"Tea," said Mr. Bickersteth, with his usual economy of words.

"How thoughtful of you!" She was touched.

"It was Adela," he confessed, as they went out to the lift.

"Dear Adela," Mrs. Bickersteth purred. "Where is this child going to sleep?"

"In a little room next door to Nanna."

"So that I shall be quite safe!" Elsie put in solemnly. What dears they were, she thought. But if only they'd understand that she was grown-up. In fact older, in many ways, than her parents. A faint cloud fell on her spirits. Behind the joy of a visit to Paris was the desire to force the issue concerning her immediate future. She meant to get Nanna on her side.

The old nurse was delighted to see her. She carried her off after tea with the excuse of unpacking, for she was longing for Torlish news. As she left the room, Elsie looked back, a silent entreaty in her eyes.

Something in the young face caught Mrs. Bickersteth's attention, kindling a secret flame of romance. With her smooth, bobbed hair, boyish figure, resolute mouth and candid eyes, this young daughter of hers might have been some young knight setting forth to crown his spurs—seeing afar the Holy Grail!

And suddenly she thought of Joceline.

In that moment, she made up her mind. The battle with Youth was over.

"Now, dear!" She sat down, facing her husband as he stood with his back to the mantelpiece. "I want to know first what you've decided about this Agricultural College?"

"Decided?" The Squire frowned. "I could hardly do that away from you. Besides," he added hastily, "she's a girl and you're the best judge."

Mrs. Bickersteth sighed. How like Richard!

"Well, we can't leave it at that," she said. "The question is, can we afford it?"

"I think so. With care. Fownes is after the shooting again."

"But there are other ways." Mrs. Bickersteth was thinking. "There's Grandmamma's portrait—the Hoppner. It's mine and I can do as I like. Paignton would give me a good price. He's always been keen to buy it. I don't see why you should lose your shooting. It isn't as if you hunted now. Yes, Grandmamma can go."

Her husband stirred. Leaning forward, he put a hand on her shoulder.

"Your grandmother shall not go." Their eyes met, grave and tender, filled with the spirit of sacrifice. "I can manage. I'm getting on and long days with the guns tire me. Besides it means entertaining. It isn't as if there were the boy. That's made"—he paused—"a difference. Now we have to think of his sisters." He saw her lip tremble and went on quickly, "You want Elsie to have this chance?" She nodded her head. "Very well. You can tell her that it's settled."

"How good you are!" She rose and kissed him; then wiped her eyes, unashamed. "I'll help you and economize. I can, if I put my mind to it. And I'm well now." She smiled bravely. "I walked back, from beyond the Madeleine this morning. Fancy that! Oh, and I bought the child a hat."

"Then you'd better present it and afterwards you can tell her our decision. Mind you, there's nothing settled yet about that farm." He hesitated. "We shall see. But it might be possible, and Henry wouldn't turn her out. At present, sufficient unto the day! Now I'll go and find her for you."

He went, glad to escape from an atmosphere of emotion. Rarely did he show his feelings. But he loved his wife and was proud of her.

Presently, Elsie came in with the same questioning glance. She found her mother by the window, staring out at the river. She turned at the sound of the closing door.

"That you, my dear? Here's a birthday present—in advance!" Beaming, she pointed to a round cardboard box with an ornate label. "I was going to bring it home with me, but now I think you'd better have it, to wear in Paris."

"A hat?" Elsie forced a smile. She had dreamed of choosing one herself. And mother's taste was archaic! All the same, she must play up! "I say, how precious. Thanks awfully, mater!"

She began to unfasten the string.

"I hope you'll like it. It's very simple." Mrs. Bickersteth watched anxiously as Elsie dived into the tissue-paper. "You have to arrange it to suit you, but I think I could show you how."

Elsie had drawn out the hat. She gave it one look, ran to the glass, pulled it on from the back, dragged out a smooth lock on each cheek, gave the crown a little poke and wheeled round, her eyes shining.

"It's lovely! A perfect nuthatch!"

This was the latest Torlish expression, in fond memory of the "cuckoo."

How pretty she looked! Mrs. Bickersteth felt a sudden thrill of pride. But how had she guessed what to do?

"Well, come and give your mother a kiss?"

"Rather!"

The fresh lips pressed her cheek, and Mrs. Bickersteth could hold her news back no longer.

"I'm afraid it won't be much use to you at the Agricultural College," she said.

She waited breathlessly. Elsie had gone quite pale.

"Mother!" she cried.

"Yes. We're going to try and afford it. Your father and I have talked it over."

There was no doubt now of Elsie's feelings. Mrs. Bickersteth stepped back, throttled.

"And I thought the hat was a bribe!" burst from her daughter's repentant lips. "Oh, you are dears! I will work. Some day I'll repay you and we'll set old Torlish on its legs. This is the jolliest day of my life!"

In this spirit, she listened to advice—loads of advice—from her mother and was told by her father when he appeared that it could be discussed later and she had better get ready for dinner.

They went down, a united trio. Mrs. Bickersteth nobly chose the seat with its back to the door, at the table reserved for them. Her husband and daughter should watch the visitors coming in, since it was her own favourite amusement. There was no one very exciting at present and Elsie poured out Torlish news. How Lady Fownes had mistaken Sir Geoffrey Bingham for a poacher and ordered him out of the woods, as he was taking a short

cut to see father at the Manor, and had added insult to injury by sending him the very next day some early asparagus with a gushing, apologetic letter. Sir Geoffrey had left this unwelcome gift at the Cottage Hospital, with her ladyship's card attached—and the matron had promptly written to thank her!

Mrs. Bickersteth chuckled and asked for more. She was carefully dissecting her fish when Elsie paused in the midst of a sentence.

"Look, father!"

Both pairs of eyes were gazing fixedly at the door.

"What is it?" Mrs. Bickersteth asked. "Something French?"

"No." Elsie gave her father a wicked glance. "She must have followed you here from the boat!"

"Sh! She'll hear you." The Squire frowned.

"But who is it?" his wife persisted.

"It's father's *dream* in the woollen cloak! I must say she's awfully pretty."

Mrs. Bickersteth was intrigued.

"If I turn my head, can I see her?"

"One minute! They're sitting down. Now," Elsie prompted. "On your right! They won't notice you, they're talking."

Mrs. Bickersteth peered over her shoulder, her gaze drifting from table to table. It was suddenly arrested. Her eyes protruded; she caught her breath.

That golden head bent forward, the delicate line of throat and chin rising from the black dress, and the smile parting the girl's lips as she listened to her companion all were poignantly familiar! "It's Joceline!" Mrs. Bickersteth gasped. "With—yes, it must be—Oliver!"

She was rising, when Elsie clutched her arm.

"Don't! He's seen you—he's coming across. Do you know them?" The truth broke in on her, at the sight of her mother's excited face. "Not your Bagnoles lovebirds? How priceless!"

CHAPTER XVIII

"I WISH we'd known who you were," said Elsie to Joceline, "when you cast the mantle of Elijah over father on the boat." She gave him a wicked glance. "I wonder he didn't prophesy that we should meet you here to-night!"

Mrs. Bickersteth frowned at her daughter. She disapproved of such allusions, but she felt too happy sitting there in the smoke-wreathed gallery, serving coffee to her guests, to correct Elsie openly. Here, at last, was the end of her journey; her lovers reconciled.

"It's never wise to be a prophet where uncertain people are concerned," Joceline responded, smiling, "and we were a day late already. We'd planned everything so nicely"—she turned to her hostess—"and then we were kept, at the last moment, by legal business. We meant to be here to receive you when you arrived from Bagnoles. It was very disappointing, but lawyers are so slow!"

In her sapphire eyes was a hint of mischief and Trench, amused, divined the cause.

"I'm not a lawyer now," he retorted. "And you can't accuse me of want of hustle!"

"I can't!" Joceline laughed. Unconsciously she looked down at her new wedding-ring. "But I wish now we'd sent you a wire," she told Mrs. Bickersteth. "Only it would have spoilt our 'surprise.' I never dreamed you'd go to the Convent on the first morning you arrived." For she had

learnt of this adventure. "And then to be turned away like that! It was Sœur Agnès and she's always grumpy when they're busy with the holiday cleaning. But of course, poor thing, she couldn't know whom you meant by Mary Gringold. If you'd said 'Sœur Marie-Angélique,' there wouldn't have been any trouble. I am sorry."

"It doesn't matter now, my dear." Mrs. Bickersteth beamed at her. How sweet she looked with her hair arranged in that pretty, soft way, and the faint colour in her cheeks due to shyness and excitement, the knowledge of the secrets they shared. As to Trench, he seemed a different man, "I'm only so pleased to see you again and to hear all your news. Your great news." She sighed sentimentally.

"Well, we hadn't much time to lose," said Trench, for the benefit of the others. "I'm due to sail in a week and I didn't like the idea of Joceline coming out later to marry me. All that long journey alone. My partners have been very patient and it's getting a busy time on the ranch."

Elsie, immediately interested, began to ply him with questions. Inevitably, he praised the climate and, catching his wife's eyes, laughed.

"Joceline says I'm to be fined whenever I boast about it now—that it's my staple conversation! But really, you know, it *is*—" He stopped and joined in the joke against himself.

"I thought it was only in England that we fell back on the weather," the Squire put in unexpectedly. "Though, of course, from a different standpoint. California is one of the places that I've always wished to visit." "Then come to us next winter?" Trench responded eagerly. "All of you. That would be fine!" He turned to Mrs. Bickersteth. "Say you will?"

"We'll see," she temporized wisely.

Their eyes met, hers filled with questions. She was aching to hear the whole story and to get Oliver to herself. If only she could find some excuse! It was exasperating to talk in this conventional fashion, hampered by her family, who knew the bare outline of the romance, but held no idea of its secret depths. For she had been scrupulously loyal, both to the living and the dead. She wondered how Joceline and Trench had met. Had Joceline run away from the Convent, or her lover discovered her address and effected a rescue? The notion thrilled her. A ladder? That high wall! Her imagination rioted.

At last her husband unconsciously offered a loophole for her escape. The smoke from his cigar had drifted across the table into her face. Recoiling, she waved it aside with her hand. He apologized:

"I'm sorry, my dear. Is it too much for you?"

"A little." She snatched at the straw and rose. "I think I'll go into the drawing-room. No, don't let me disturb you all!" She checked the universal movement. "Unless—" Boldly, she smiled at Trench.

"May I come too?" His eyes twinkled. "I'd love to have a chat with you."

"If your wife can spare you?" she answered sweetly.

"Of course." Joceline gave her a glance of affectionate comprehension.

"We'll look after her," said Elsie, mischief in her hazel

eyes. They said plainly: "Give father an innings!" and the squire fidgeted.

They watched Mrs. Bickersteth sail out, turreted and superb, Trench beside her, a willing convoy.

"I love your mother," Joceline confided. "You don't know how good she's been to us. As a matter of fact, we came back to Paris to see her again and say good-bye."

"No?" Elsie was inwardly pleased. "She's all right."

Her voice was deliberately indifferent, but it did not deceive her companion. She guessed the strong link between them; the gulf dividing age and youth bridged by a common forbearance. They might quarrel, but they would make it up and *forget* that the same blood flowed in their veins: the bitterest incitement to battle. For, of all conflicts, civil war is the most exhausting and prolonged.

The Squire, with an effort, broke the silence that had fallen on the trio. He remarked that London had been full—unusually full. Yes, quite—er—inconveniently crowded. Perhaps Mrs. Trench had noticed this?

She had. Conscious of duty performed, he sank into a state of coma whilst the two young people chatted. He was a little annoyed with his wife for leaving them. He never wanted to talk to her, but he liked to have her by his side. This was his idea of marriage. It was always the same at Torlish. However busy she might be, she must break off her occupation when he felt this inchoate need of her. Not to help him, exactly, but to be there! She could talk if she liked, but she mustn't expect perpetual answers or attention. He had his own affairs to think of.

Sometimes his wife revolted. It seemed to her that a faithful old dog would fill the position admirably, as they paced up and down the garden, silent, or sat, in the hush sacred to it, before the fire in his library.

Such a waste of time! But she tried to be patient, because he loved her and she knew that in any serious crisis he would stand by her, to the death.

But now she had a "live" man, who belonged to a younger generation, to stir in her that second youth—of the mind, not the body—which is so often the reward of the simple and sincere after the knell of the fifties has sounded and has nothing in common with the desire, actuated by secret despair, of the sensual woman battling with age. For here was Trench, swift-minded, responsive; above all, here was Romance.

They decided against the *salon* with its usual evening atmosphere of segregation and listening ears. Trench suggested sitting outside in the little gravelled strip between the hotel and the high railings that cut off the passers-by.

"But you mustn't catch cold," he added. "Can't I run up and get you a wrap?"

"If you will." She told him the number of her room. "Just tap at the door. Piper's there. She likes to look out and watch the trams."

"Ah, I want to see Nanna—and give her a kiss! Do you think she'd be shocked?" He laughed as his companion reproved him. "You don't know what I owe her! She wrote and told me Joceline's train. In a letter with a pair of socks which I had left behind at Bagnoles."

"Piper did?" Mrs. Bickersteth stared. "She never said a word to me."

He grinned.

"You don't know all my flirtations! What's more, she registered the parcel and that proved my salvation. I was just going out and the porter stopped me to sign the receipt for it. When I saw the Bagnoles postmark, I tore it open and found the letter. So I was there at the station. But I'll tell you when I come down."

He vanished up the narrow staircase.

Mrs. Bickersteth stood there, wondering. Piper! Who would have believed it? And to keep it dark all this time. Suddenly she remembered those socks. Not Richard's, after all. She had put them in her knitting-bag and then forgotten their existence.

She looked up. Trench was returning, her warm cloak over his arm, his face wearing a broad smile.

"I did it!" He folded the cloak about her. "And she asked for some more socks to mend. I call that an invitation! But what a dear old thing she is. She blessed me like a mother."

"She's a treasure," her mistress responded. "Now, Oliver, tell me everything."

"I will—outside."

Passing through the open door, they found a seat away from the windows, between tubs filled with geraniums, above them a lilac in full bloom. Its scent seemed to enclose the pair in some dear and remembered fairy-tale, the tall gate with its gilt scrolls heightening the illusion. They were safe here, in a castle garden, the Seine beyond them for a moat, mysterious in the evening light. Paris

was a world apart, with its fever and allurements, its all-pervading suggestion of sex and its glittering materialism. But here was the fulfilment of dreams. A love that had passed through the fire, to emerge, purified.

Mrs. Bickersteth breathed it in as she listened to Trench's earnest voice.

"I was ready, on the platform, waiting. She hadn't time to defend herself and I drove her to the Convent. But I couldn't shake her resolution, although I knew that she cared. She'd got it fixed in her mind that we'd killed her mother and mustn't marry. That it would be a sin. So, at last, I told her the truth."

Mrs. Bickersteth started.

"Not—the cachets?" There was horror in her voice.

"Yes. I knew it was kill or cure—for me, I mean, and my hopes—but I risked it. And I was right. It removed the heavier burden. Her mother might have lived to a hundred. I proved, too, that it wasn't an impulse. It had been done deliberately, for a cruel punishment. One must forgive the dead"—he stared through the railing sombrely—"but one can't forget. That's human nature. Even in the gentlest minds, they stand judged by their acts: their good deeds and their bad, their loyalties and treacheries. It's easy to blot out weakness, but tyranny, never!" His jaw hardened. "From first to last, man expects justice. He mayn't get it, but that's his ideal."

"You're right." Mrs. Bickersteth nodded her head solemnly. "But—poor Joceline!"

"Yes. It felt like striking her. She sat there, all broken up, and I daren't even take her hand. And then, to leave her at the Convent!" His voice was husky as

he continued, "I'll never forget watching her go through that door in the wall and the bolts grind after her. I thought then I'd lost her for ever."

"It's a dreadful place!" Mrs. Bickersteth shuddered.

"I'm not so sure. Wait till you hear the rest of the story. I think you'll be rather surprised." He gave her a fleeting smile. "Well, I went away. She'd promised me that I should see her once again before I sailed, and I held her to it. She wanted five days to herself, to devote to her mother's memory. Of course, I agreed to this. I didn't tell you of our meeting because it all seemed so hopeless. Time enough when you came to Paris. I thought you'd had your share of worry!" He laid a hand over hers, which were folded in her lap. "But in five days I returned to the Convent. They admitted me, without trouble. The place seemed to be in a frenzy of cleaning, nuns scrubbing, and beating carpets, having a hell of a time! I'm sorry—the word slipped out."

Mrs. Bickersteth smiled indulgently.

"Go on. You saw Joceline?"

"Not at first. I was shown into the parlour and the Mother Superior came in. I didn't like the look of that, but she put me at my ease at once by saying that Joceline expected me and was engaged for the moment. Meanwhile, she sat there and talked. A clever woman, I should think, plain and severe, but with beautiful hands. She asked me about California—had friends in a Catholic Mission there, oddly enough, not far from us. I told her that many of our neighbours belonged to her Faith and, naturally, all the Spanish crowd. To tell you the truth, I was puzzled by some of the questions she put to me. At the

end, quite calmly, she suggested that, if I were going back shortly to England, she would be glad if I would take Joceline home to Norfolk."

"What?" Mrs. Bickersteth was staggered.

"Exactly." Trench nodded. "I was too astonished to reply and she went on to say that the school was reopening and, although she was always glad to see old pupils on a short visit, they could not stay indefinitely. Whereupon I blurted out: 'But Joceline wants to become a nun!' And she smiled—yes, actually smiled. It was time enough to consider that after she had been received into the Church. This needed serious preparation. Joceline must learn the lesson of patience. Of humility as well, etc. To cut it short, they didn't want her!"

"But her money?" cried Mrs. Bickersteth. "Did they know of her fortune?"

"They did. So Joceline told me later. The Mother Superior had talked with her and, of course, had studied her in her childhood. She explained to me that, in her opinion, it was better for Joceline to recover from a period of shock and other matters"—Trench evaded a direct issue—"before she took such a serious decision. She must be sure of her vocation. Meanwhile she was better at home, where she could be quiet and reflect. But I needn't trouble you with the rest."

"I've never heard anything so amazing! What did Joceline say to it all?"

"Poor Joceline!" His face was tender, yet a faint touch of humour curved his lips. "She was like a child with a broken bubble. She's proud and it wasn't exactly pleasing to have offered herself and all she possessed and then

to be told to 'think it over'! They'd been pretty severe with her too; given her, I fancy, a foretaste of the real conventual life as distinct from her happy schooldays. If she hadn't loved me it might have made her still more determined. Luckily, I was there, at the psychological moment." He drew a deep breath and resumed the story. "I drove her out to St. Cloud and we went up into the woods. I guess"—he smiled—"the woods did it! Walden." Mrs. Bickersteth wondered, but did not like to interrupt him. "I told her, too, what I believe; that, if the dead can still see us, they must see us clearly, without delusion, no longer swayed by earthly passions. To renounce all thoughts of happiness, in memory of her mother's jealous and possessive nature, might prolong her spirit's suffering —possibly its punishment. One can't tell; one can only guess." He stared out, over the high railings, in a vain effort to pierce the veil. "But that's how I feel-honestly. And aren't we told to let the dead bury the dead and return to the living? Anyhow I made her see that she would be ruining two lives and you know the result." He ended abruptly, "We crossed to England next day, got married and came back-to you!"

"My dear, I'm so thankful." She was touched. But she could not forget the dark side of the story and her conscience was pricking her. "Did the Mother Superior know everything?"

"Everything." His face was grave.

"Ah!" Mrs. Bickersteth straightened her shoulders. Then that was the reason! The girls returning, young creatures in the Mother's charge. Yes, she had acted wisely. It was a scholastic foundation, not a home for

penitents. Now, she must speak, herself. "Oliver?" She steadied her voice. "I haven't had a chance before of talking to you about—Domfront. But it was very wrong. I could hardly believe it of you! Marriage cannot alter the fact. I feel it my duty to say this plainly."

Trench shifted on the seat. Now he was facing her. Bravely she met his eyes. They were filled with a bewilderment that slowly gave place to anger.

"But— Good Lord, you don't think—" He broke off, watching her. "You do! Well, you might have trusted me. It was only to force Mrs. Verney's hand. A sin, if you like, against convention but, as to anything more, I swear that Joceline was safe with me. Why, even the Mother Superior guessed! Do you think, if not, she'd have allowed me to take Joceline back to England? Of course she was down on us for the whole business of running away and for deceiving Mrs. Verney and she put me through my paces finely when we returned re-engaged—made me promise about the children being Catholic and so forth—but that, no! She had the grace to believe us there."

Mrs. Bickersteth's ruddy cheeks had paled. She had never felt so humiliated! To be held up as an unflattering contrast to the head of a convent and accused of harbouring evil thoughts—she who detested Catholics! And to be corrected by a man young enough to be her son and not—not of the same caste! For old traditions die hard. It was a cruel insult.

She nearly swept to her feet and left him. Then everything that was fine in her—the real charity of the woman—rose to her aid, fought and conquered.

"Thank God!" The tears stood in her eyes. "I've wronged you, Oliver. Please forgive me?"

"That's all right." His face softened. "I guess it looked rather bad." A sudden thought shot through him. "But it makes it all the more wonderful that you should have been so good to us." His eyes widened. "Standing by Joceline through the funeral and thinking that—saying nothing! You didn't?" he asked her anxiously.

"She had quite enough to bear," Mrs. Bickersteth reminded him.

"Well!" He looked at her with the old boyish affection. "All I can say is—"

He didn't say it. Mrs. Bickersteth seemed to sway towards him. For the second time that evening, Trench, with an inward chuckle, kissed a woman other than his wife.

"It's made me very happy," Mrs. Bickersteth said incoherently. She was not referring to the kiss. "And now I must hear, my dear—I've really been very patient—what it was Mrs. Verney said when she refused her consent. Of course, I didn't ask Joceline in a time of such sorrow and I couldn't get at you. Well?" She straightened the comb in her hair and looked expectantly at Trench.

"Didn't you know? I'd forgotten that." He was studying her thoughtfully. "It was the crux of the whole business, what tied my hands—that horrible secret! I know that you won't repeat it." He waited for her answering nod. "Mrs. Verney said that Joceline's old illness had never been a nervous breakdown, but a mental

trouble, now dormant, but liable to recur, with any shock or violent emotion."

"No!" Mrs. Bickersteth recoiled.

She saw the man's face harden.

"Sure. Moreover, in the doctor's opinion, her only chance was a quiet life. She was unfit for marriage and especially for childbirth. If she survived that ordeal, the offspring might be feeble-minded-some degeneracy in the blood. In Mrs. Verney's family there had been a case of religious mania and that frightened me still more, for I knew that Joceline was keen on religion. I dare say you noticed that Sir Raphael kept harping on the subject?" Mrs. Bickersteth looked bewildered, but Trench went on with his story. "A lie, but so cleverly constructed. It excused Mrs. Verney's tight hold on Joceline. She was not only mother, but keeper. And of course none of those men who admired my poor girl had dared to tell her. They just believed it and went away. To marry her might seal her doom. I almost believed it myself! was all so plausible—the way Mrs. Verney told it. But there again, you came to the rescue."

"I?" Mrs. Bickersteth was puzzled.

"Yes—without knowing it. You introduced me to Sir Raphael and of course I had heard of his reputation. That day I met you on the hill, I was on my way to him. I put the whole case before him and he proved himself a friend indeed. As long as I live I shall be grateful. It was he who planned the day at Domfront. All the time, he was testing Joceline, watching the effect upon her of wine, argument, and so forth." He paused. Mrs.

Bickersteth had started, remembering the little scene in the doorway, Sir Raphael spying on the lovers. "Afterwards he gave me his verdict," Trench resumed, as she did not speak. "He could find no abnormal symptoms; he considered her highly-strung, but sane. He was right, for if anything could have unbalanced her reason it was the shock of her mother's death. And do you suppose Mrs. Verney would have committed suicide if she had believed that this would have meant an asylum for her only child? No." He clenched his fist, his eyes averted. "I try, but I can't forgive her!"

"But why did she do it? I've never heard anything so unnatural!" It seemed to Mrs. Bickersteth that a chill had descended on the garden. She sat there, inwardly shivering; her motherhood had received a shock.

"Because she wasn't sane herself!" Trench saw his companion's look of horror and nodded solemnly. "Her manner of death proved this. She preferred to take her own life rather than to abdicate—that's the truth! According to Sir Raphael, her egoism was a disease. She was eaten up with vanity, jealous of, and for, her daughter. A love that was as cruel as hate. She must stand first, whatever happened. In fact, monomania. But Joceline has persuaded herself that Mrs. Verney had faith in the She didn't know what nerves meant and had always despised them—mixed them up with hysteria. Their old village doctor had muddled the case, confusing the cause with love-affairs, thwarted instincts, and all that rot, though the specialists knew better. Joceline was utterly played-out, her strength absorbed by her parent. You can't nurse the old, night and day, without rest, when they're like Mrs. Verney, and not pay a heavy price. On the top of the War, too, and limited food and the shock of losing father and lover. Only her pluck pulled her through. It was nearly too late when she came to Bagnoles. She was ripe for a decline. But, thank God—" He broke off, the muscles in his face working.

"Thank God, indeed. She'll be happy now," Mrs. Bickersteth said in her soothing voice.

"In time," Trench corrected gravely. "She still grieves and blames herself. I'll be glad to get her right away into a new life. She's set on becoming a Catholic, but what does it matter? So long as the religion helps her. That's all one asks for. Something to hold to." He added, under his breath, "There's only one God—with different names."

"Perhaps." Mrs. Bickersteth sighed. "I suppose I'm a very broad-minded woman."

Trench smiled at this in the warm darkness that had slowly encroached on the dusk. Lamps were glowing on the road. On the bridge, fairy-like, a string of lights made a pathway, with another tremulous one beneath, like falling sparks that the river lapped. Paris wore her diadem, to dazzle and hide the wounds of war.

From far away came the endless murmur of a city that sought its nepenthe of pleasure after the long day's work, but here, save for the purr of the trams and an occasional step or voice, was the silence of mysterious boughs and the scent of the lilac.

A spring night, calling to lovers. It awoke in Trench a longing to be with Joceline, alone, yet he did not like to make a move. His companion looked so peaceful. He was amused when she broke the silence by asking him in

a dreamy voice what he would do with his place in Norfolk.

"Joceline's? She's going to let it."

Mrs. Bickersteth stirred.

"Oh, what a pity! Such a lovely old house—and you could have lived there? Besides, it's been in the family for centuries. It does seem sad." She had a bright idea. "There must be some land to farm. Why not, instead of California?"

"No, thanks. I'll farm my own. Why, you don't think, at my age, I'd potter about on Joceline's money?" He smiled scornfully. "Now, too, when I've got my chance. That ranch of ours is going to be *some* success, I can tell you! We can build a separate bungalow. I don't mind her helping in *that*, because it's for her own comfort. But as to—" He stopped and his face lit up.

From the shadowy darkness of the doorway came a clear call:

"Hullo, you two!" Elsie stepped down into the garden, Joceline by her side. "We began to think you'd eloped! Father has gone to bed."

"To bed?" Mrs. Bickersteth was indignant. "It isn't late." Somewhat stiffly, she rose from the bench. "Thank you," she murmured, for Trench's hand had slipped under her elbow. He would go through life, she thought, helping lame dogs over stiles. So "straight" too. She had always known it! "We're coming in," she told Elsie.

"About time! It's past eleven. We've been playing dominoes."

"No!" Her mother was horrified. She put a hand on Joceline's arm. "My dear, what must you have thought

of me?" She peered through the darkness at the pale oval of her face. Yes, suffering had left its mark, but love and freedom would wipe it out. "I've been keeping Oliver from you."

"But we came back purposely to see you, and Oliver had so much to say. He always has!" she added, smiling.

"A very good thing in a husband too," Mrs. Bickersteth said warmly. "You'll be glad of it in later years." Her voice sank to a whisper. "I am so thankful all is well. You deserve happiness—both of you."

It was her amende honorable.

Elsie had slipped past them and was talking eagerly to Trench. In the warm silence, her words drifted back:

"... One of my own. Isn't it great? After I've done my course at the College. Oh, they haven't *promised* it—it all depends on my work. But I'm not afraid of *that!*"

Youth? Mrs. Bickersteth's heart was full. She wanted to mother all the world. But she mustn't keep the lovers waiting.

"Come, Elsie! It's time for bed. Say good night to Mr. Trench." Again she embraced Joceline. "No, you stay here, dear, with Oliver." She turned to him for support. "It's a lovely night. It will do her good to have a little fresh air and that lilac smells delicious. Oh, look at the lights on the bridge!"

